THE LAST PITCH

“A True Story of Slums, Struggles, Startups and Scars”

This is not just a story. This is my last chance .

The Last Pitch

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Dedicated To Team BREE

For the persistence, patience, and courage they showed in the hard times.

And

To everyone who ever dared to dream, even when the world laughed.

This is for you.

Acknowledgments

I owe this book—and this journey—to many.

To my parents and siblings, whose silent prayers carried me further than I could ever see.

To the BREE team—Aamir, Farhan, Haider, Qasim, Farhat, Danish, Fatah, Ijaz and everyone, from managers to baristas, who stood beside me with nothing but belief.

My franchisees who bestowed their trust upon me and believed in my capabilities.

And to every person who picks up this book—you've already played your part in keeping this dream alive.

Dear Reader

This book is more than a memoir— It's my startup pitch to the world.

The Last Pitch is a raw, true story of survival, betrayal, and relentless hope. Through every page, I'm not just telling my past— I'm building my future.

My dream is BREE, a bold new startup born from everything I've lived. But to bring it to life, I need this story to be heard by millions.

And that's where you come in.

Every reader brings me one step closer to that dream. If this story moves you—share it. Post it. Pass it on.

Because The Last Pitch isn't just my story— It could be the spark that lights a global journey.

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Introduction:

The Last Pitch is not just a memoir—it is a rare window into the untold entrepreneurial spirit rising from the rugged heartlands of Pakistan. It is a journey carved through poverty, displacement, broken systems, shattered dreams—and the quiet, relentless determination to rise anyway.

In a world where most startup stories come from the polished tech campuses of Silicon Valley or the glossy boardrooms of global metropolises, The Last Pitch brings something else—something raw, visceral, and honest. It is the real-life story of a founder who builds not from privilege, but from scarcity. From slums to startup boards. From being silenced by circumstance to speaking with purpose.

This is a story of a boy born in tribal Pakistan, forced to migrate again and again, shaped by trauma, faith, failure, and fire. Who faced betrayal not just from markets, but from friends. Who fought for dignity before he could fight for equity. And who still dreamed. Not just for himself, but for the forgotten millions like him.

Through gripping chapters that blend startup strategy with street wisdom, and moments of heartbreak with sparks of triumph, The Last Pitch is a rare literary hybrid: part entrepreneurial playbook, part human epic. It is the voice of a generation that is rarely seen in global business literature—a founder from the margins, with nothing but ideas, integrity, and insane resilience.

If you're tired of startup stories filled with jargon but empty of soul—read

this.

If you want to understand how true founders think in the face of betrayal, breakdown, and broken capital systems—read this.

And if you're ready to believe that the next big idea can come not from a co-working space, but from a chai shop in Hostel City—then turn the page.

This is The Last Pitch.

And it might be the first time you read a story like this.

Best, Qamar Abbas

Table Of Contents

Chapter 1: Before I knew My Name

I was born in the winter of 1989, in a village the world had forgotten—Shublan, just outside the city of Parachinar. The summers were kind, but the winters bit like wolves. Ice would creep under doors and settle in bones.

My name was Qamar, but no one called me that. To them, I was Kamran. Maybe they misheard it once, maybe it was easier on the tongue. I never corrected them. I was too small to care. After a while, even I started believing it—"Maybe I really am Kamran," I'd think, staring into nothing. Funny how names lose meaning when you're too young to hold onto them.

What I remember most clearly is our tiny mud house, just two rooms and a courtyard that felt like the entire world. In the center stood a well, quiet and deep, watching everything we did like a silent elder. One corner held a chicken coop, patched with wire and dried mud. My father's van sat parked just outside—dusty, tired, faithful. He was a van driver, always on the road, always chasing life.

But what stayed with me, more than anything else, was the babies' swing. It hung from the black wooden beams of the ceiling, creaking gently above my parents' charpai beds—beds made from thick, handwoven ropes of Mazari Palm.

Ah, Mazari Palm—that plant wasn't just a plant. It was everywhere. Its leaves were ropes, carpets, bread baskets, storage trays, even slippers of some people. We burned the dried leaves for fire in the winter. Every home had a pile of them, stacked like treasure. In that forgotten world, Mazari Palm was life.

Beside our house stood a tiny Imam Bargah—a place of black flags

and heavy silence. It scared me. A metal hand perched on top of each flag, reaching out to the heavens. Inside, a pulpit wrapped in black cloth stood alone in a hall divided by a dark curtain—men on one side, women on the other. The walls were draped in more black, embroidered with the words “Ya Hussain.”

I used to stare at those flags and think, “Why does God live in such a scary place?”

It felt haunted. Not because of ghosts, but because of silence and black curtains.

Sometimes, my mother would wrap a Mazari Palm leaf around our necks, tie it like an offering, and walk us barefoot to the Imam Bargah.

“We need mercy,” she’d whisper, almost like she was speaking to herself.

I didn’t understand this strange ritual.

“Does God really need to be emotionally blackmailed with leaves? He is all merciful, He can hear us without the leaves around our necks” I once asked myself. I still don’t know the answer.

My family was small, but full. My father, quiet and sun-worn. My mother, soft-spoken and steady as the earth. I had four elder sisters —Anwar, Najmeena, Yasmeen, and Basmeen—each of them a mix of playmate and protector. Then came my younger brother, Aamir, born after me, still a bundle in my mother’s arms.

That was our world.

Two rooms. A well. A swing. A van. A God who lived behind black

curtains.

And a plant that held everything together.

There was a man in the village we all feared and laughed at, sometimes both at once. His name was Kukoo—the madman. Every village had one, but ours had Kukoo, and he was unforgettable.

The boys used to tease him endlessly. They'd shout names, throw stones near his feet, and scatter in all directions when he snapped. And snap he did.

"I'll kill you today, I swear by God!" he'd roar.

Then, like some strange ritual, he'd grip his dusty Chitrali cap in his teeth, hunch down, grab whatever stones he could find, and hurl them with wild fury in every direction. Most of the time, he hit nothing. But one time, he clipped a rooster. The whole village heard about it. After that, even the chickens avoided him.

Another strange man lived among us—Laghan Dada. He wasn’t mad. He was mystical. He cured people through amulets, blowing softly over the sick like he was whispering secrets to the wind. He sat cross-legged on a dirty Mazari Palm bed, right in the middle of the village ground, as if he were the village’s reluctant guardian. People came to him with fevers, heartbreaks, and things they didn’t have names for.

“Blow on him, Dada,” the mothers would plead, holding out their coughing babies.

And he would. With eyes half closed, he’d chant under his breath and blow across the child's forehead, as though passing his own breath into their bones.

My uncles lived close by. Their homes were like copies of ours—muddy walls, Mazari Palm beds, and the same old baby swings creaking gently above them. That sound—soft rope against wood—was the lullaby of our childhoods.

One uncle, Noor Hussain, we all called him Abba. He wasn't my father, but in that part of the world, love makes many fathers. He sold rice pudding in the village—sweet, cold, and served in chipped bowls. He had a limp, his leg weakened by something we never understood. But he never let it slow him down. He moved with purpose, even if it wasn't fast.

My other uncles—Haider Ali and Hussain Ali—were farmers. I don't remember much about them. Only that Uncle Haider was always lying on a charpai, his head resting on a huge, black, greasy pillow, a radio perched on his chest like a companion. The news would mix with static, rising and falling with the wind. I never understood a word, but it felt important. It was his world, and we respected it.

And then there was Ammai—my paternal aunt, and a force of nature. She was a woman, yes, but she talked like a man, walked like a man, and sometimes even argued like the village elders. No one questioned her authority. Her two sons worked in the UAE, and that alone made her a figure of respect. To have children abroad was wealth. But she carried herself with a dignity that didn't need money.

Behind our home, the air always buzzed with the hum of a tiny flour mill. It was a constant roar, day and night. The mill belonged to Qanbar Mama—a hardworking man whose eyebrows and face were always covered in flour, like he had aged in snow. He looked like a ghost, but one with strong arms and a patient heart.

At home, my sisters were my world—Anwar and Najmeena went to the boys' primary school, a rare thing for girls in that tribal, Pashtun society. Yasmeen and Basmeen stayed home. But all four of them loved me fiercely. Maybe because I was the only boy, or

maybe because I came after four girls—a son was rare, a kind of celebration.

And I felt it.

I felt important.

Cherished.

Some things from that time are carved in my memory like stone.

The smell of my father's van in the early morning—that smoky burst from the silencer as he warmed the engine. It should've been choking, but to me, it was the smell of adventure. A scent that said, "Something is about to begin."

Another joy was when my sisters came home from school. They always brought me something. Not toys, not sweets—a fruit plucked from someone's garden, a shiny stone, even a piece of sugarcane. To a child, love hides in small things.

And the greatest joy of all—when my father returned at night. The sound of the van pulling in, the door creaking open, his tired footsteps—it felt like the family became whole again. Like the puzzle had all its pieces.

Then one day, something shifted.

I remember my mother and sisters packing up our things. They moved quickly, quietly, like they didn't want to stir the air. Our few

belongings were folded, tied, and stacked. The house felt… emptier.

“Where are we going?” I asked.

“To the city,” they said. “To a new house.”

“A city?” I whispered. I had never seen one.

They told me the new house was made of cement, not mud. That it was in the grid station—a place that powered the whole city. That it had bitumen roads, street lights, and beautiful buildings.

It sounded like heaven.

The next morning, we loaded our lives onto a tractor cart—beds, pots, blankets, memories—and drove away. I remember looking back at the house one last time.

It didn’t cry.

But I think I did.

Chapter 2: Voices Behind The Blue Gate

Our journey ended in front of a massive blue steel gate. At least, it looked massive to me back then. Everything did. Gates. Roads. Rooms. People. When you're four years old, the world isn't measured in meters—it's measured in awe.

The gate creaked open and we entered.

"This is it," someone said.

The grid station.

It didn't feel like the village. But it didn't feel like the city either. There were no bazaars, no fruit sellers shouting and no crowds. And yet, the roads were solid, smooth bitumen, lined with proper streetlights, and the houses—quarters, they called them—were built from cement, not mud. It was something in-between. A half-city. A waiting city.

Surrounding the grid station was a tall boundary wall, and beyond it? A strange kind of land—not desert, not forest, but a semi-arid sprawl, filled with silvery, wild-smelling plants called Tarkha. The locals knew the name. I just knew they looked like little ghosts dancing in the wind.

We stood in front of a small government quarter.

It looked like a palace to me.

Two rooms. A kitchen. A concrete floor.

“How is it so big and beautiful?” I thought, stepping through the door.

Now, when I visit the same place as a grown man, I smile. It looks tiny—as if time shrank it while memory kept it large.

While my parents and sisters began unloading our things—pots, bedding, and bundles wrapped in old quilts—I stood off to the side, watching. And that’s when I saw two boys, just about my size. They were running. Laughing. Free.

One of them smiled and waved.

“I’m Javed,” he said.

“I’m Kamran,” I replied automatically, still not knowing I was really Qamar.

The other boy stepped forward. “I’m Hadi.”

We didn’t shake hands. We didn’t need to. We were friends within minutes.

Together, we began exploring.

There was a strange silence in the grid station, a silence that wasn’t empty—it was alive. It made every sound louder. The rustling Tarkha, the buzz of insects, the creak of rusted hinges… but most of all, it was the hum. That deep, electric hum.

“What is that sound?” I asked.

“It’s the grid,” Javed said.

He led me to it—a chain-linked fence enclosing a field of giant machines. Transformers, towers, wires hanging like metallic vines. The sound vibrated in my chest like a heartbeat from the earth itself.

“This place gives light to the whole city,” Javed whispered, as if we were standing near something sacred.

Next, we ran toward the servant quarters. There were eight quarters in total—only four were filled. We were the fifth. The other three stood empty like skeletons of stories never told.

We ran inside one. The echo of our laughter bounced off the bare walls.

“Hello!” I shouted.

My own voice shouted back.

We ran faster, trying to outrun our own echoes.

All the families living here were employees of the grid station. Except us.

“Why did they give us a house here?” I once asked.

No one had a clear answer.

Maybe someone had connections.

Maybe they just wanted to fill the emptiness.

Maybe the house had been waiting for us.

There were three families in total. The fourth house was occupied by a quiet gardener from Bannu. An old man who lived alone, always trimming something, watering something, or sitting silently with a cup of tea. He didn't say much. But he nodded a lot.

I was four years old.

And just like that, we all began to find our people.

I had Javed and Hadi.

My little brother Aamir found his own friend Raza—a tiny boy who followed him around like a shadow.

My sisters found girls to play with.

And even my mother, who rarely spoke to strangers, found someone to laugh with over cups of tea.

There was no school bell here. No market chaos. But something was blooming.

A life was beginning.

Not louder. Not richer.

But quieter.

And maybe, deeper.

By nightfall, our little cement home had begun to feel like a place we belonged to. A few rugs, some charpais, pillows, and our basic kitchen pots were all we had—but they were arranged with love, and that made them enough.

Outside the window, the streetlight hummed softly, casting long shadows through the curtains. It felt like a hotel room in a movie—clean, bright, and somehow full of promise.

I looked outside and whispered to myself,

“We’ve upgraded.”

The next day, Javed and Hadi had something to show me.

“A secret,” Javed grinned, his eyes glowing.

“You can’t tell anyone,” Hadi added.

We snuck behind the quarters, past the chain-link fence, through a narrow hole in the boundary wall that led to the open lands beyond. On the other side sat an old government veterinary hospital, barely alive.

At the back of the hospital was a tiny toilet room, now transformed into a strange little shop. It belonged to Mittha Khan, the hospital’s watchman. A small man with a red face, short like a child, but sharp as a hawk.

He’d covered the toilet bowl with a wooden plank, laid a table over

it, and on that table he displayed snacks and candies. Popcorn, chew gum, sugar lollipops, and our favorite—the one rupee lottery.

It was a paper packet filled with sugary popcorn, but hidden inside was a tiny plastic toy. A spinning top. A whistle. A finger puppet. Useless—but magical.

“Try your luck, Kamran!” Javed laughed.

I handed over my one rupee note with a trembling hand, tore open the pack… and found a tiny red whistle inside. I blew it immediately, and it squeaked like a rat. I was overjoyed.

But when I returned home, the joy vanished like smoke.

The house was in chaos. My mother’s face was pale. My sisters were crying.

“Where were you?!” someone shouted.

“Why did you disappear?!”

I was pulled inside like a thief.

Yasmeen, my sister, had gone looking for me. She had wandered near the road outside the gate and was hit by a car. Her leg was fractured. My father had rushed her to the hospital.

And me?

I was dragged into the house and met with slaps, shouts, and chappals flying from every direction.

“Because of you!”

“She could’ve died!”

I didn’t cry. I just stood there, my whistle still in my dirty little pocket.

But somehow, despite it all, I still loved life in the grid station.

That place gave me something I had never felt before—confidence.

It whispered to me:

“There’s more out there. More to see. More to become.”

Then came a new wonder—one that changed everything.

Javed’s father, Abid Baba, bought a black-and-white TV. He kept a cow in the back and had planted a few fruit trees, so his quarter always smelled of milk and damp earth.

But the TV… that was treasure.

Only Javed’s elder brother Ghadeer was allowed to turn it on. The rest of us sat on the floor like worshippers in a shrine. And when “Ainak Wala Jin” came on—magic filled the room.

The room was small. But during those episodes, it became a cinema,

a kingdom, a dream.

Whole families would gather—women, children—shoulder to shoulder, wide-eyed, smiling. I didn't even understand all the dialogues, but I understood the feeling: wonder.

Other families began to matter to me too.

There was Najaf Mama, Hadi's father. A calm man. He too had a cow, and fruit trees. His daughters were kind and often came to play with my sisters.

Then there was Yusuf Mama's family. They were Christian. Their job was cleanliness and sanitation in the grid. But what made Yusuf Mama special was his stories.

He'd sit cross-legged in his room, framed pictures of white-bearded saints hanging behind him, and tell tales of miracles, invisible hands, and holy footprints that healed the sick.

I'd listen, eyes wide, wondering if such things were true.

"Do saints really walk among us?" I once asked myself.

Life in the quarters became richer with every passing week.

People shared food—a kind of unwritten ritual. Every evening, you'd taste something different. Biryani from Yusuf Mama's home, chicken korma from Abid Baba's, Zarda—the sweet rice from Hadi's mother.

I loved it. Our home was simple, but our table was full of variety, flavor, and stories.

One by one, the remaining empty quarters filled.

A welder from Bannu arrived with well-educated daughters.

Muneer Hussain, a school principal, moved in. His son Nadeem became my friend.

Then a family from Punjab came. They spoke Urdu, wore polished shoes, and carried books. The father was a banker. His son Fawad became another friend, and slowly, from him, I started speaking Urdu too.

My world was stretching.

I was learning that not everyone looked, dressed, or spoke like us.

And that was okay. That was beautiful.

The grid station became a world of its own—a neighborhood carved out of emptiness. Girls gathered in groups to play, boys invented games from dust and dreams, and the echo of laughter replaced the earlier silence.

I was happy. Truly, innocently happy.

And then, without warning, it ended.

A notice came. Evacuation.

“All non-employees must leave within 30 days.”

We weren’t employees. We had to go.

I watched as my father silently began making arrangements.

And then one day, another tractor cart appeared.

Another morning of folding rugs, tying bundles, and lifting beds.

As we loaded up, I stood at the edge of the quarter and looked back one last time.

The rooms that gave me my first taste of belonging.

The friends.

The hole that opened to another world.

The popcorn lottery.

The electric hum.

The shared dinners.

The black-and-white TV.

All of it was fading.

As the cart moved forward, I turned and looked back again. And again.

The grid station grew smaller and smaller, until it was just a blur on the horizon.

Then it disappeared.

Chapter 3: Imamia Colony

We were on the move again.

My father was driving the wheel of his van, steady as always. Behind us, our entire home—beds, rugs, pots, memories—was piled high on a tractor cart, bouncing along like an old companion who had followed us from one life to the next.

After a short drive, the world began to change. The road widened, the pace quickened. We were entering Parachinar city—the real one this time.

The air smelled different—smoke, spices, something better roasting on coal. Somewhere nearby, barbecue was grilling, and the smoke moved like a hungry ghost through the market, stirring appetites.

We passed the Headquarter Hospital, a noisy, chaotic landmark where everyone seemed to be in a hurry. Then we moved deeper into the city, into Eidgah Market, where everything moved louder, faster, denser.

I pressed my face to the window.

“Everyone here has somewhere to be,” I thought.

“Everyone is… doing something.”

And then we turned off the main road, into a tight branch road, and arrived in a dense residential area.

It was **Imamia Colony** .

It was unlike anything I had seen before.

Crowded. Complex. Alive.

Houses everywhere—some tall, some small, some made of brick, others of steel and plaster. Narrow streets twisted like puzzle pieces, stacked with kids, bicycles, fruit carts, and the hum of city life.

Another tractor cart. Another tiny home. Another place to start from scratch.

This one had two rooms, a single toilet, and no kitchen. The roof was made of corrugated steel sheets, shiny and sharp like it could cut the sky. I looked around and whispered to myself,

“This isn’t the grid station anymore.”

While my parents and sisters unloaded the van, I slipped away, drawn to the noise and mystery just outside.

The first thing I saw was a huge building—the Government Middle School for Boys, towering near our new home. In front of it, children ran wild in a wide empty piece of land. But they weren't like me.

They stared as if I had dropped from the clouds. Some looked amused. Some didn't.

They looked… tough.

Their faces were sharp, their stares sharper. I felt it in my stomach:

"These kids aren't like Javed and Hadi."

Fear crept in.

"What if I get lost?"

"What if they beat me?"

The streets were a maze, and the colony felt endless. My world had suddenly become too big to hold in my little hands.

That night, the rain came hard.

The steel roof screamed under the pressure—like bullets hammering down. Water leaked through holes and poured onto the floor. There was no veranda, no shelter between the storm and the front door.

We huddled together in the dry corners, covering the essentials with whatever cloth we had.

But even in that chaos, my mother and sisters worked like magicians.

They unpacked our little world—woven Mazari Palm rugs, planks of wood, old newspapers, and bits of used packaging. Within a few hours, they had created shelves from wooden planks, trimmed newspapers in curved edges and pinned them beneath the shelves for decoration. Even a few frames from old magazines found their way onto the walls.

It was art. Poverty's art.

And somehow… it felt like home.

The next day, curiosity won again.

I was under strict orders—don't disappear, show your face every hour, or else.

So I left in short bursts, exploring piece by piece.

Around our home were massive bungalows with towering gates. One belonged to Dr. Afzal Hussain, a rich doctor, my father whispered, who had come back from London. His private hospital sat inside his mansion, like a kingdom within walls.

Another hospital nearby belonged to Dr. Amjad.

All these places felt alien, like buildings out of television.

Still, I wanted to go deeper.

I followed the road into the heart of the colony. It felt like leaving Earth—as if the universe began just beyond the curve of that road.

The tough boys were out again. They watched me as if they could smell fear. I looked away.

Then, black flags caught my eye—dozens of them, flapping gently above a massive Imam Bargah of Imamia Colony.

I stopped. Kissed the gate.

My mother had taught me: you show respect to sacred places.

Inside, I saw a man teaching Quran to a group of boys. I hovered at the edge for a moment, unsure.

Something told me I didn't belong there—not yet. I turned and walked back.

Later that afternoon, I slipped out again. This time, I found something else—a graveyard, and at its edge, a small shrine wrapped in black flags.

I pressed my lips to its locked gate.

"What is this place?" I wondered.

Later I would learn: the shrine of **Agha-e-Irani** —a sufi saint. Every Thursday, the air around it would be thick with fragrance, from incense burning near the tomb.

That place would later become my refuge, my temple, my secret garden in the city.

But on that first day, I only knew it by its smell… and the way it made me feel:

Safe. Quiet. Sacred.

Chapter 4: The Day I knew My Name

About a week after we moved in, my father held my hand and said quietly,

“Today we visit your school.”

We walked past the Imam Bargah, through winding streets, and stopped in front of a low, dusty building that buzzed with shouting boys and clanging shoes.

The Government Primary School East Parachinar. Just 300 meters from our home, but it felt like a journey into a new world.

Inside, we found the headmaster, Master Kamal Hussain, seated in a classroom. He was a slim man with a neatly kept white beard, transparent glasses resting on the bridge of his nose, and the kind of presence that demanded respect without asking for it.

The room was loud—full of boys in dusty black uniforms made from rough black Kashmiri fabric, and each one wore a black cap stitched with a red crescent. The air was thick with chalk and jute-rugs' dust, noise, and the wild energy of children with nowhere else to be.

The headmaster looked at me.

"What's his name?" he asked, pen poised.

For the first time, my father said clearly,

" **Qamar Abbas** ."

The pen scratched against the page.

Qamar Abbas .

My real name, finally written. I didn't know why, but I liked it that day. It felt right. Like I had been found.

Master Kamal instructed my father to buy me a Takhti—a flat

wooden board we used for writing alphabets and numbers with black ink. It had to be washed, rubbed with mud, dried, and reused. Over and over. Learning through repetition, erasure, and effort.

That evening, we went to Khyber Books, one of the largest bookshops in the city, located near the Girls' High School on School Road. Workers moved briskly through narrow aisles, dusting shelves, sorting books.

My father had little money, but he was a proud man. He picked up:

A notebook. A black cap. A Takhti. And two basic schoolbooks

Then we visited a cloth shop, where he quietly asked the shopkeeper for a favor.

“I’ll pay next month,” he said.

They shook hands. A small bundle of black Kashmiri cloth was wrapped and handed to us.

At home, he gave it all to my mother.

“Stitch his uniform. And a bag. He starts tomorrow.”

My mother, a quiet magician with thread, sat at her sewing machine that night and turned cloth into hope. By morning, I had a freshly stitched uniform and a school bag made from an old piece of cloth.

My sisters were taken to the Government Girls School, and all were admitted without trouble.

My parents had done it—the reason we had left the village had come true.

We were all in school.

On my first day, I stepped into the building with my bag clutched tightly in both hands.

The classrooms were chaotic. The playground smelled like dust and sweat. Boys spoke in languages I didn't understand—one group used a soft, unfamiliar tongue I later learned was Persian. Some boys had runny noses, others looked like they were ten years too old for the class they were in.

The place was wild.

I stood there feeling small.

"What am I doing here?" I thought.

But then—cleanliness saved me.

Though we had little, my mother and sisters believed in neatness like religion. My hair was combed. My clothes were pressed. My hands were clean. And in a sea of wild boys, that stood out.

Some teachers noticed.

A few boys did too.

And by midday, I had made my first friend.

His name was Hassan Mehdi, though everyone called him Chaani.

His house was just two streets away.

Soon his older brother, Muhammad, became my friend as well.

My sisters had already taught me alphabets and numbers, so when the teacher gave us a basic writing task, I completed it with ease. That caught the attention of more boys.

That same day, I found myself talking with:

Murtaza, Sadiq, Irshad, Wahid and the class monitor, Qanbar.

I walked home that day with tired feet and a heart full of warmth.

I wasn't invisible anymore.

Near home, I made more friends too—boys who studied in private schools, but played with us in the afternoons. We formed cricket teams. Invented rules. Played football in an empty plot. The colony was beginning to feel like home.

And then came the day I met the boys from the Syed Family.

Syed Hassan and Syed Shahid were the close relatives of the famous rich doctor who had returned from London. Their home was massive. Their TV was in color. And when I watched Ainak Wala Jin there, sitting on clean rugs in a bright room, I felt like I had stepped into another planet.

Later, I became close to Anwar, a quiet boy in my class, and his

brother Qaiser, who studied at Kurram Public School, another elite private school.

Anwar had a red face, constantly teary eyes, and curly hair that grew like coiled threads on his scalp.

I liked my new friends, the rich kids of elite schools.

But they also reminded me of everything I didn't have.

Then came the real nightmare.

Two boys: Wahid Khushi and Shareef Khushi.

They were Afghan refugees, older, bigger, tougher. After school, they worked in fruit shops, and during school, they ruled the classroom with fists.

Every day, they bullied me, blackmailed me, beat me.

I tried to complain once.

The teacher looked at me blankly.

"Five sticks for you. Five for him."

A strange justice.

After that, I learned to keep quiet.

And the beatings continued. For two years.

But perhaps the most painful wound was invisible—The boys from elite schools.

Their transport vans. Their English-speaking uniforms. Their clean bags and shiny shoes.

And then there was me—in a black cap and black Kashmiri clothes, walking to school in the dirt.

They called our school “Tomatoes’ School.” We were a joke to them.

Every morning, I timed my walk so they wouldn’t see me.

I hid behind walls and walked through the narrow streets to reach my school invisibly.

Anything to avoid the shame of being seen in the uniform of poverty. To avoid the shame of studying in a “Tomatoes’ School”

My biggest dream?

To study in their school. To wear their uniform. To be one of them.

But that dream… never came true.

Chapter 5: When God Was Listening

Parachinar, in those days, was a place of many colors—tribes, beliefs, accents, and smells all folded into one narrow valley. Though it was a Shia-majority city, there were large communities of Sunni sects, and we lived side by side. Most of us knew one another. We attended weddings together, grieved at funerals together. We didn't need labels. We just lived.

The city was also home to thousands of Afghan refugees, and with them came new languages, new clothes, new food, and even new games. The bazaar reflected all of it—a chaos of culture, a symphony of struggle.

I belonged to the Turi tribe, one of Parachinar's oldest Shia lineages. More specifically, I came from the Mian Mureed, a sub-tribe, known for its strong roots and unique rituals. We had our own customs, our own spiritual flavor.

Fridays were off days in those times, which meant Thursday afternoons carried the magic of a weekend. And one Thursday afternoon, after school, I felt a sudden pull in my chest—a need to step out of my neighborhood and into the unknown.

I wanted to visit the Central City Imam Bargah, the largest and most

sacred in Parachinar. My classmates spoke about it all the time—how they went there for Matam, how the halls were filled with echoes of grief and glory.

“You’ve never been?” Chaani had asked me once, surprised.

So I decided that Thursday would be the day.

I had five rupees in my pocket. That was all.

And the city was waiting.

I walked alone, heart racing, through Imamia Colony and into the main road that led to the bazaar. The world exploded around me.

Vendors shouting. Grills smoking. People haggling. Children crying. Men in waistcoats darting between shops.

The smell of barbecue filled the air—meat sizzling on coals, its scent dancing on the wind. I couldn’t resist.

I spent one rupee on a cone of vanilla ice cream, its sides already melting as I walked. I licked it slowly, careful not to let any fall, each taste colder than the last.

I asked a boy near the fruit stalls,

“Bhai, staraa matamkhaana cherta de?”

Eng. “Brother, where is the main Imam Bargah?”

He pointed ahead.

And then I saw it.

I walked through its giant iron gate and stepped into a different universe. A towering black flag in the middle, waving in the sky like a messenger of sorrow.

People walked in every direction. There were three gates, connecting roads, alleys, and shortcuts. Some had come to pray, others to pass through. But I was there for something else.

I walked into the main ground, kissed the pole beneath the black flag called “Alam”, and stood in awe.

Inside the hall, a pulpit stood tall and draped in black cloth, like a throne of mourning. The walls were lined with black fabrics, embroidered with “Ya Hussain” in red thread. On the walls, there were paintings of a graceful man—his green turban, his gentle eyes, his beard flowing like poetry.

I had never seen anything like it. It was majestic, sacred, and a little terrifying.

From another hall, I heard a voice—a man reciting something in a mic. I followed the sound and found myself in the mosque section of the complex.

There, seated in rows, were dozens of young boys, all dressed neatly, their heads bowed, reciting Dua-e-Kumail in soft unison. The leader’s voice echoed through the speakers, and I felt it vibrate in my chest.

For a moment, I just stood there, still as stone, watching.

I didn’t know the words. But I wanted to.

“One day, I’ll sit there too,” I told myself.

As the sun began to set, I remembered the beatings that would come if I got home late.

I ran. But God wasn’t done with me yet.

On my way back, near Nazarbandi Chowk, I passed a government park—a lush, green paradise with children running freely inside. Slides, swings and laughter everywhere.

I stopped at the gate.

And then… I froze.

Something inside me whispered: “This isn’t for you.”

The kids inside looked wealthy, free, beautiful.

Their joy didn’t belong to me.

I watched them play. For a long time.

From outside the gate.

And then I turned and walked away.

Back home, I was greeted with scolding and sarcasm.

“Where were you?”

“We thought you ran away!”

“You think you’re grown now?”

But just as the storm passed, my mother said,

“Come. We’re going to the shrine of Agha-e-Irani.”

A wave of warmth passed through me.

We carried a packet of red sugar candies and a bundle of white candles. The air outside was cool and scented. At the shrine, the graveyard glowed with candlelight—hundreds of tiny flames dancing in the dark, flickering like prayers.

The scent of incense filled the air, rising from burning embers scattered near the graves. Men, women, and children moved in silence or soft whispers, lighting candles, offering sweets, laying flowers.

We lit our candles and handed out candies to children nearby.

And somehow, every sorrow I had felt that day—the park gate, the poverty, the hiding—melted away.

This was a ritual, yes. But more than that, it was a balm.

And just before we left, a neighbor came by with a tray of sweet yellow rice—Zarda—sent as an offering, a shared blessing.

They said that on Thursdays, God listens.

And that night, I believed it.

Thursdays became the heartbeat of my life.

They were the end of the school week—and the beginning of something sacred. A night of rituals, healing, and soft light.

We waited for them like children wait for Eids.

Because every Thursday came with the promise of God's nearness—and a little bit of magic.

And then came Muharram.

When the month of mourning arrived, Parachinar turned black.

Literally.

Black fabrics hung from homes, shops, windows, even cars and vans. Loudspeakers no longer played songs. Music stopped entirely.

The audio cassette shops replaced singers with Noha artists, playing them loud to attract customers. Even VCR shops started renting

tapes of Nohas and processions. You could hear the grief in the air itself.

But for children like me, there was a beauty in this grief.

The nights felt different.

People carried torches on their way to the Imam Bargah. Not solely because they needed light—but because it was part of the ritual, the aesthetic, the vibe.

And oh, how I wanted one. But I couldn't afford it.

So I walked beside others, empty-handed, my eyes locked on the flames in their palms.

Still, there was joy in it. The streets glowing. The Noha beating like a second heart. The sense that we were all part of something larger than pain.

From the 7th to the 10th of Muharram, the city entered a trance.

Processions filled the streets. The Matam grew louder.

Men struck their chests in rhythm, and the sound travelled—you could hear it echoing from miles away. It had a music of its own. A symphony of sorrow.

And then came the 10th of Muharram, the day of Zanjeer Zani.

Men bled openly, swinging sharp chains across their backs, spinning into a blur of pain and devotion. And somehow, in all that pain, there was a strange kind of peace.

But my story took a different turn—because of who I was.

I belonged to the Mian Mureed sect of the Shia community.

And we were… different.

While others gathered in Imam Bargahs, we had something called the Doya.

And in Doya, everything was different.

A massive fire was lit in the center. Around it, men stood in circles. Musical instruments began to play. The Noha was sung, not chanted —melodic, rhythmic, haunting. And then… the dance began.

Not wild. Not chaotic. But slow, synchronized, soulful.

It was a sufi dance, a movement of the spirit. Every beat was a heartbeat. Every step was a prayer.

We didn't just mourn Imam Hussain. We danced for him. We burned for him.

And I believe the world needs to see this—a ritual that's rarely spoken of, but carries the scent of the divine.

And then came Ramadan—a month of stillness and discipline, full of whispers and prayer, lanterns and late-night Sehrees.

Then Eid followed.

The morning of Eid had its own magic:

Waking up early. Wearing new clothes. Going door to door, collecting Eidi

And of course, the great tradition of smashing eggs with friends like it was a championship

Even outside our sect, Parachinar was rich with ritual.

On the 12th of Rabi-ul-Awal, the Sunni community celebrated the birth and death of the Prophet Muhammad with a massive procession.

Thousands walked through the streets with green flags, chanting salutations, singing praises.

And though we didn't participate directly, we would ask our Sunni friends,

"What happens there?"

"Tell us about the procession. The rituals. The slogans."

It wasn't division.

It was curiosity, coexistence, neighborhood.

And in my own tribe—rituals were endless.

There was a day for every saint, a night for every Imam, a celebration or mourning every week.

Besides the two Eids that most Muslims celebrated, we had:

Eid-e-Ghadeer

Eid-e-Nawroz

Birthdays and death anniversaries of Imams.

In a way, our entire year was built on rituals.

Grief, joy, and prayer intertwined like threads in a sacred cloth.

And for children like me, this meant one beautiful thing:

There was always something to look forward to.

Religion gave us rhythm.

It gave meaning to poverty.

It gave purpose to pain.

It gave color to weeks that would've otherwise been gray.

It wasn't just about belief.

It was a dose of hope in the middle of hell.

And then came the year that changed everything.

1996 .

A storm was on the horizon.

And none of us saw it coming.

Chapter 6: When Minarets Became Bunkers

It was the 5th of September, 1996.

A bright morning. Birds. Warm sunlight. Breakfast with my little brother Aamir, who had just started school. We wore our uniforms,

grabbed our Takhtis, and headed off like it was any other day.

I was in Class One.

Aamir was younger, but already proud to carry his writing board like the big boys. We were excited, as only little boys can be, chasing new letters and playground whispers.

That day at school was calm. Almost boring.

Our teacher sat at his desk—his face always angry, always silent. Chalk dust hung in the air. The classroom buzzed with the usual noise of wooden boards being scratched with ink-dipped qalam pens.

Then, without warning, gunfire.

At first, it was far off—a dull thud, like someone slamming a heavy door again and again.

Then it grew.

Louder.

Faster.

Angrier.

The teacher stood up.

Whispers turned into panic. Footsteps pounded the hallways.

Someone ran past the door shouting:

“Shia-Sunni war has started!”

The words didn’t fully make sense.

But I knew what panic felt like.

And I knew I had to find Aamir.

I ran straight to his classroom. Found him in a corner, eyes wide, still holding his Takhti.

“Come on!” I said, grabbing his hand.

“We have to go home!”

He nodded. He trusted me.

“Hold your Takhti in front of your chest,” I told him.

“If a bullet hits, maybe it won’t kill us.”

That was our defense.

A wooden board.

The armor of children.

I had no map, no compass.

But something inside told me: Don’t take the main roads.

We ducked into the narrow alleys.

Zigzagging through back lanes and narrow passages.

Behind us, the city erupted into chaos.

Gunshots cracked through the air.

And then… something worse.

Rocket launchers.

The sky itself trembled.

In Parachinar, you can always see the three tallest minarets—two white ones rising from the Shia mosque, and one red from the Sunni mosque.

From their peaks, the entire city lies beneath you like a map.

But now, those minarets were firing weapons.

They had become bunkers.

Strongholds.

Places of war, not worship.

The very structures built to chant “Allahu Akbar” were now spitting bullets and rockets.

The towers that once echoed prayers now echoed destruction.

No one was safe.

No home, no alley, no child.

Because the guns were shooting from above.

Still, we kept running.

One foot in front of the other.

And by some miracle, we reached home.

My mother ran to the door, opened it, and saw us—dusty, breathless, but alive.

She dropped to her knees and pulled us into her arms.

She didn’t speak. Just held us. Tightly.

My father stood behind her, silent, shaken.

But the danger wasn’t over.

Yasmeen and Basmeen—my sisters—were still at school.

My mother’s hands trembled. She paced, wept, muttered prayers under her breath.

“Where are they? Ya Hussain, where are they?”

Minutes passed like hours.

Then—a knock at the door.

She ran again.

And there they were.

My sisters. Alive.

An old man had walked them home through the chaos.

We exhaled. Together. All at once.

For now, we were safe.

But something inside me knew…

Nothing would ever be the same again.

This was the first time we were introduced to something that would haunt us for years.

Sectarianism. Hate.

All in the name of God.

Parachinar had always been diverse—a valley shared by Shias and Sunnis, living together in a complicated peace. Until now, it never felt so fragile despite some past conflicts between the two sects.

But after the bloodshed of that day, everything cracked.

They said the fighting began at Government High School.

That some Sunni students had spray-painted the words “Shia Kafir”—Shias are infidels—on the school walls.

That the principal of the school tried to protect his Sunni students when tensions flared.

That he brought them into his office to save their lives.

That someone broke in and shot the students and the principal dead.

That was the match.

The fire spread quickly.

The war lasted for days.

Gunfire became background noise.

Windows stayed shut.

Doors double-locked.

And then, curfew.

Soldiers patrolled the city.

Mosques, shrines and Imam Bargahs remained closed.

The market silenced.

We were trapped in our homes, locked in with our fear.

Our food ran out.

We had nothing but plain white rice left in the kitchen.

Day after day, the same thing.

No oil. No vegetables. No spices. Just rice.

Some didn't even have that.

Parachinar was starving.

Eventually, the curfew relaxed, just enough for people to step outside.

But when we did, everything had changed.

The city had become a breeding ground for hate.

People who once shook hands now walked past each other in silence.

I had Sunni friends I loved—boys I laughed with, played with.

But that ended.

We were too young to understand it, but the poison of fear and revenge spread quickly.

I was told they were the enemy.

That their people had killed ours.

That it was a holy war, and every death on our side was a martyrdom, every death on theirs was justice.

I started believing it.

Because everyone around me believed it.

We had a Sunni family living close to our home—the Zazais, also known as Jajis.

They were wealthy cloth merchants, respected, well-liked.

During Ramadan, we used to exchange food.

They'd send sweet rice and kababs, and we'd send back dates and korma. It was simple, unspoken love.

Their son Khalid studied at Government High School where the war of 1996 started from.

He was killed on the first day of the war in the school.

But after that, no one cried for him. No one cared.

No one knocked on the Zazai family's door to offer condolences.

They had become "the others."

The grief stopped at the sectarian border.

Even in death, we were divided.

Soon, many Sunni families began to leave Parachinar.

Some left out of fear.

Some because they were pushed.

Others simply disappeared.

And with them, the soul of the city began to vanish.

Then came another blow.

The road that connected Parachinar to the rest of Pakistan passed through a Sunni-majority city called Sadda.

And after the war, Sadda was shut to us.

The road was blocked.

No food, no medicine, no fuel.

Nothing came in.

Nothing went out.

We were cut off.

And hunger—real, desperate hunger—returned.

The government eventually sent ration trucks.

They came with flour, oil, sugar, and guards with guns.

Long lines formed in the dust.

I stood in one of them, quiet, shivering, clutching a little bag in my hand.

When my turn came, they handed me a small sack of flour, some sugar and a half pack of cooking oil.

It wasn't much.

But to us, it felt like gold.

The war had stopped.

But something else had started.

A slow-burning hate.

A fear of neighbors.

A silence where friendship used to be.

And though we were children, we felt it.

We carried it.

When the dust finally settled and the guns went quiet, I returned to school.

Everything looked the same… but nothing felt the same.

I glanced around the classroom. The ink-stained dusty jute rugs were still there. The blackboards. The familiar smell of chalk and ink.

But the faces… the faces were missing.

Naseem. Zubair. Abdullah.

Gone.

No one knew where exactly.

No one asked anymore.

They were Sunni, and that had become enough.

The school felt hollow.

Like a fruit that looked ripe on the outside but had been eaten from within.

The headcounts had dropped.

The energy was gone.

And in place of laughter or innocence, there were stories.

My friends now spoke in the language of war.

They told tales of Shia fighters who had killed tens of Sunnis, some allegedly dragged from their homes and executed.

We listened wide-eyed.

We were boys, raised on myth and matam, now chewing on militancy and martyrdom.

We weren't old enough to fight—but old enough to clap for it.

We became more Shia than before, as if it was something we had to prove now, not just be.

Outside the school, the city looked bruised.

Parachinar had once been a mosaic—Sunni and Shia, Afghan and Pakistani, tribal and urban, Pashto and Persian, all folded into one living story.

But that story had been burned at the edges.

The cloth markets—once full of color, texture, and the scent of fresh fabric—now stood like haunted ruins, shutters half-closed, windows shattered. The new home for stray dogs.

The beautifully decorated Sunni shops—the ones with ornate displays and warm smiles—were gone.

Closed. Abandoned. Forgotten.

The ambient restaurants, where laughter echoed over bowls of pilaf and sizzling kebabs, had vanished.

Food options narrowed.

Bazaars thinned out.

Crowds shrank.

Even as a child, I could feel the absence—the missing languages, the missing laughter, the missing balance.

The cultural diversity that once made Parachinar feel alive had been wiped away by a single wave of war.

We had survived.

But something beautiful had not.

Parachinar had lost its color.

Its warmth. Its trust. Its music.

And we—its children—had learned, too early, what it means to grow up in the shadow of division, to walk through the ruins of a city that no longer knew how to heal itself.

The guns had stopped.

But the echo of that war would stay in our ears for years.

Chapter 7: The Boy from the Bungalow

Months passed after the war of 1996.

Slowly, almost shyly, life returned.

Some Sunni families remained in Parachinar, quietly blending back into the rhythm of the city. The hate had not disappeared, but it

had settled into silence, tucked under the routine of daily life.

The beauty of the valley began to breathe again.

Thursdays came back—with the glowing lights and fragrant incense at the shrine of Agha-e-Irani.

The rituals of Ramadan, the black fabrics of Muharram, the joy of Eid, and the chants of 12th Rabi-ul-Awal reappeared like old friends.

People were smiling again, eating together again, even if behind those smiles was something colder than before.

But something had shifted.

Shias were now more Shia. Sunnis more Sunni.

The war had deepened the roots. Everyone clung harder to their identity.

Still—the city moved forward.

One warm afternoon, I went to visit my friend Syed Hassan, and that day I met someone who would change something inside me forever.

His name was Syed Kumail.

He wasn’t like anyone I had ever seen before.

Not just in appearance—but in energy.

Kumail looked like he had stepped out of a television ad.

He wore blue jeans—real ones, not the stitched imitations we wore—and a striped casual shirt that looked like it had been bought from another country.

A small scar near his eyebrow added a strange elegance to his face.

He didn’t walk.

He glided.

He didn’t talk.

He invited you in.

Kumail was from the elite class. The real one.

The kind of family that had drivers, house help, a gate with bells on

it.

A life that had seemed, until that day, unreachable—like something from a different planet.

But he was kind. Gentle. Curious.

And within minutes, we were friends.

“Here,” he said, pulling a crisp fifty-rupee note from his pocket.

“Go get snacks. Whatever you like.”

Fifty rupees.

For candies.

I held the note in my hand like it was a royal decree.

On my way to the shop, my brain kept repeating the same thought:

“This boy just spent fifty rupees on fun.”

“What kind of world does he live in?”

I returned with a bag full of treasure.

Tattoo-sticker bubble gum by CandyLand

Top Pops

Tamarind candies—Imli, sticky and perfect

We shared them in the massive living room.

Then we played hide and seek—but not the kind you play in tight lanes or backyards.

No.

This was hide and seek in a palace.

Kumail’s house was a bungalow in every sense of the word.

Big rooms, high ceilings, polished floors that shined under sunlight.

There were trees, green grass, and a massive courtyard where the wind felt cleaner somehow.

To me, it looked like a movie set, like those houses in dramas that my family watched at night.

We lived in a two-room tin-roof house.

They lived in a home that echoed with space.

And yet… I felt welcome there.

His father, Syed Muneer, was a politician.

In Pakistan, politics was the hobby of the rich, and Syed Muneer had the look of someone who knew power intimately.

His mother and sisters were kind and soft-spoken.

And then there was Maaji—his grandmother.

A warm-hearted woman with soft, wrinkled hands and a smile that made me feel like I belonged.

She never let me leave without tea. Or sweets.

Most of the time, I avoided people who made me feel poor.

People whose shoes didn’t have scratches.

People whose lives I couldn't afford to even imagine.

But Kumail was different.

Even though every inch of his world reminded me of what I didn’t have…

he gave me something I couldn’t get anywhere else.

Hope .

That friendship changed me.

I began to care more about how I dressed.

Started combing my hair better.

Spoke with a little more confidence.

Began to believe that I, too, belonged in places with clean floors and big windows.

Every afternoon, I'd walk to Kumail's house.

Not just to play… But to dream.

Our friendship lasted barely a month.

One afternoon, I walked to Komail's home like always. The gate was open, the sunlight spilling across their courtyard. I was already smiling, imagining the snacks we'd share, the places we'd hide today.

But at the door, Maaji met me with an apologetic look in her eyes.

"Komail's gone, beta," she said softly.

"His father won the elections. They left for Teerah this morning."

I stood there, frozen.

Gone?

Just like that?

This was the ‘90s.

There were no mobile phones. No social media.

Even landlines were rare—a privilege of the rich.

If someone left, they disappeared.

And Komail disappeared.

I walked home quietly, the weight of that emptiness pressing down on my chest like a stone.

This wasn’t just the end of a friendship.

It was the loss of something I had begun to believe in.

Komail's father had become a Member of the National Assembly. Their family had moved on. Moved up. Moved out of reach.

And I stayed behind, in the same tin-roof house, with the same stitched bag, holding a new kind of sadness I hadn't felt before.

The worst part? I still wanted to belong to his world.

Even in my inferiority, I wanted to stay connected to the boy in blue jeans and striped shirts.

His disappearance didn't just hurt—it shook the foundation of my hope.

I had always been a hopeful boy.

Through poverty.

Through fear.

Through sectarian war.

Hope was the one thing no one had ever taken from me.

Until now.

For days, I kept thinking he might return. That maybe one afternoon I'd hear his voice from the gate, or see his striped shirt peeking out the window.

But that day never came.

Around that time, there was a drama on PTV—called "Dhuaan".

In one episode, a group of friends lost one of their own.

He died, and the soundtrack played a song by Nusrat Fateh Ali Khan:

"Kise da yaar na vichrhay…"

May no one ever lose a friend.

That song shattered me.

I hadn't lost a friend to death, but in my heart, it felt the same.

Sometimes, I'd close my eyes and imagine Komail and I meeting again—this time in England, at some grand university, where we were both successful and wealthy.

I imagined myself wearing clean shoes, speaking fluent English, walking through glass-walled libraries with confidence.

I imagined him recognizing me—not as the boy from the slum, but as his equal.

Time passed.

And as it always does, it healed.

A month later, the ache dulled.

Two months later, I stopped looking toward his street.

And life, somehow, became normal again.

I found joy in the same old rituals.

Thursday nights at the shrine.

Cricket in the empty lot.

Ramadan and Eid.

Laughter with friends who hadn’t left.

The boy who lived in a bungalow was gone.

But something of him stayed with me.

A glimpse of another world.

A reason to keep dreaming.

Chapter 8: The Fragrance of Sragala

In those early years of school, nothing excited us more than the

news:

“We’re going to Sragala.”

It wasn’t just a village.

It was a feeling.

A realm of warmth, laughter, scent, and stories.

Sragala was our maternal grandparents' home—a giant, walled compound that felt more like a village within a village. Inside, over a hundred family members lived in small, connected homes—each with its own rhythm, voice, and soul.

Every corner had a personality, every room had a memory, and every pathway smelled like something beautiful.

Yes, Sragala had a scent.

Not the scent of perfume—but a soft, sweet fragrance that floated in the air, soaked into fabrics, carpets, curtains, candies, even the sunlight.

It was clean, always.

It was welcoming, always.

That scent, even today, lives in my memory like a dream I still haven't fully woken up from.

At the center of this world was Dado—my grandfather, Sardar Hussain.

He was the oldest among the brothers.

A man with laughter in his lungs and mischief in his eyes.

He held his cigarette in a peculiar way—clenched in a fist, with just the filter peeking between tight fingers, as if trying to hide it and display it at the same time.

He would take a drag, squint through the smoke, and say something hilarious about someone's walk, someone's cough, someone's habits.

Nothing escaped his wit.

Dado turned the ordinary into comedy, and the comedy into connection.

Even his silence was funny.

And then there was Kako—my grandmother.

She didn't talk much. But she noticed everything.

She had this quiet habit of collecting things—little combs, used pots, even half-used beauty soap—and setting them aside for us.

"Take this," she'd say.

"No need to buy a new one."

To her, love was in the small things. In what she saved, in what she gave.

She was always worried about us—not because we were unhappy, but because she saw how hard my parents worked.

Most of her daughters had married rich men.

Their children arrived in Sragala wearing pressed clothes and polished shoes.

But my mother had married a poor man—a man who, despite everything, never compromised on our education.

And Kako saw that.

She saw the struggle.

She saw us.

In that entire compound, Kako was our refuge.

Her house carried its own scent—so distinct that even now, when I smell certain soaps or wrappers, I'm right back in her room.

In the softness of her presence.

In the kind of silence that only grandmothers can give you.

Sragala wasn't just about people—it was about sound.

My grandparents were Mian Mureed, born and raised in the deep traditions of music and mysticism.

Almost every boy in Sragala could play an instrument.

The rubab. The dhol. The flute.

There was a music party every night—but not for performance. It was part of who they were.

Faith and melody.

Devotion and rhythm.

Sufi hearts with tribal pride.

We even had our own sacred space for mourning during Muharram —a spiritual sanctuary called the Doya.

While others observed silence and sorrow, the Doya was alive with music and mystic rituals. A fire burned in the center, and men circled around it, moving to the beat of Noha sung with instruments, each step a sacred dance.

Going to Sragala in Muharram was unlike anything else.

It wasn't just a visit.

It was an elevated experience.

A taste of the divine, wrapped in firelight, smoke, and sound.

Among the many people who made Sragala feel like a kingdom of stories, there was one man I looked at with quiet admiration—Kamal Hussain, my grandfather Dado's younger brother.

He worked as a bank officer in Kohat, which, to a village boy like me, sounded like something between a minister and a magician.

His children lived in city homes, spoke confidently, and studied in prestigious English-medium schools. They wore neat uniforms and always carried books when they visited.

To me, they were not just cousins.

They were my idea of success.

A glimpse of the life I hoped to one day reach.

Then there was Gulab Hussain, another brother of Dado.

He was a tall, broad-shouldered man, with a clean-shaven face that made him look more English than tribal. He dressed simply but stood with a dignity that made you notice him.

He was a school teacher—a man of order, discipline, and surprising kindness. Though he wasn't the eldest, the family often looked to him as the leader, because responsibility sat well on his shoulders.

He didn't say much.

But when he did, you listened.

Dado's third brother was Lal Hussain, and he was the most colorful of them all.

A government teacher like Gulab, but with a personality that belonged in folklore.

He had long brown hair, which he wore with pride.

He traveled everywhere on a blue Vespa scooter, with a red muffler draped dramatically around his neck—no matter the season.

When you heard the faint hum of the Vespa echoing down the road, you knew Lal Chacha was arriving.

He always brought something with him:

A sweet. A story. A laugh.

But the heart of Sragala was not in the men.

It was in the women—especially in one woman we loved like no other.

Agara.

She was Kako's sister, but for us, she was more grandmother than grandma.

She had her own quiet three-room home within the larger compound, a sanctuary wrapped in warmth and filled with the sound of her soft voice.

Every time we visited, we ran to Agara first.

She had only one biological son, but had also adopted our maternal uncle Khalid as her own. Her home was filled with love, but never noise. A perfect kind of quiet.

To sit with Agara was to be seen without having to speak.

And then there was Kako's home itself.

It wasn't grand. But it was always spotless.

The shoes were always lined up.

The cups were always washed and dried.

The books were stacked neatly, even if no one had time to read them.

Nearly everyone in her household was educated—which in our community was a badge of pride. It showed in the way they spoke, the way they sat, even the way they served tea.

You felt it.

Sragala was not perfect. But it was whole.

It was a place where music, order, humor, and education coexisted without contradiction.

A place where people didn't just survive—they lived well, with dignity, rhythm, and a scent of something sacred in the air.

It was a place where even a poor boy like me could feel rich, just by breathing in the right room.

Chapter 9: Shadows of Shublan

If Sragala was music and light, then Shublan was dust and earth.

We used to visit Shublan occasionally—my father's birthplace and ancestral village. Unlike the bustling, compound-style living of my mother's family, Shublan was quieter, humbler. Each uncle and

aunt had their own small, separate house, most of them made of mud and thatch.

But Shublan had its own magic.

My favorite cousins there were Hashmat and Darwesh.

Hashmat was the son of my uncle. Darwesh, the son of my aunt.

Darwesh was older, already a father of four, yet he felt more like a funny older brother than an adult. He joked like a teenager, laughed like a child, and made everyone feel welcome in his world. We loved being around him—he turned even the dullest afternoon into something worth remembering.

The highlight of visiting Darwesh's house was simple:

They had a VCR.

In those days, having a video cassette recorder felt like owning a piece of another universe. A VCR was not just a machine—it was a gateway to dreams, a window to a world of action, music, and heroes.

The first Bollywood film I watched on that machine was Karan Arjun.

It hit me like a storm.

Shah Rukh Khan and Salman Khan weren't just actors.

They were idols—larger-than-life brothers who returned from the

dead to take revenge.

I watched the film with eyes wide and heart full.

By the end, I was on the edge of tears.

It was more than a story—it was an emotional awakening.

Back then, boys didn't just watch movies.

We worshipped heroes.

We collected picture cards of our favorite actors.

Even Eid cards came printed with their faces.

A card with Shah Rukh's photo was more valuable than any prayer in calligraphy.

Darwesh's mother, my aunt Ammai, was one of the kindest souls I knew.

She had a strong presence, but her heart was soft. Her door was always open, her hands always full of something to give. In the dust and quiet of Shublan, she was a gentle light.

And then there was Hashmat—a very different kind of dreamer.

Hashmat lived in extreme poverty, but he carried himself like someone born for greatness.

He dressed well—even when the clothes were old, he wore them like fashion statements.

He mimicked the style of city boys from wealthy families and always tried to speak in their tone.

He worked at a photographer's shop in Parachinar, and that, at the time, made him feel like a VIP.

Photography was a luxury then. It was expensive and rare.

And to be around cameras and photo albums was to be near the idea of permanence and beauty.

Hashmat had big dreams.

He wanted more than just survival.

He wanted style. He wanted change. He wanted out.

His father—my uncle Noor Hussain, whom we all called Abba—sold food in a school canteen and rice pudding in the village.

That was how he fed a family of six sons, all hardworking, all trying, all pushing against the walls of fate.

But fate was not kind.

Luck never stayed.

And still, they never stopped working.

Whenever I visited Shublan, I'd wander through the fields with two more cousins—Jamal and Akhlaq.

They were my age and had the eyes of hunters.

Armed with slingshots, they could bring down birds from impossible distances.

We'd collect firewood, light a fire, and roast the birds on open flame, eating with our fingers, laughing with dirty hands.

There was something raw and real about those moments.

The kind of joy you can't buy.

On the way to Shublan, we often stopped in Mali Kaly, just four kilometers before.

That was where one of my maternal aunts lived, inside a large joint-family compound.

Every time we had plans to visit Shublan, we spent an hour or two in Mali Kaly to see them first.

My favorite cousins there were Musawir and his brother Imtiaz.

They were humble, obedient, and full of soft energy—the kind of cousins who offered you tea before you asked, who listened more than they spoke.

They had a huge nursery of plants, rows upon rows of green, and

Imtiaz ran a rental crockery shop, which he used to rent out plates and glasses for weddings and community events.

Even in that small village, Imtiaz carried himself like a businessman.

Between the mud of Shublan and the green of Mali Kaly, between roasted birds and Bollywood dreams, between dusty roads and fire-lit nights, I learned something important:

You don’t need wealth to carry ambition.

You don’t need polish to hold pride.

You don’t need cities to start dreaming.

Chapter 10: From Blackboards to Backlands

Let’s return now to Imamia Colony—to the dust, the alleys, the narrow streets, and the world I had slowly begun to conquer.

By the time I reached third and fourth grade, something had

changed in me.

I had grown into my skin a little more. My feet were no longer afraid to step outside the known paths. The city no longer looked like a monster. It looked like a map I was learning to read.

I had started visiting the Public Children's Park on my own.

I'd walk to the Central City Imam Bargah like it was my neighborhood mosque.

I roamed the bazaar, observed the architecture, and knew how to dodge the traffic.

I was no longer the boy who feared getting lost.

I had found my place in the city.

This transformation had a name.

Hassan Mehdi.

Or as everyone called him: Chaani.

Chaani was a small guy with big energy.

He didn't walk—he bounced. He didn't talk—he commanded.

His confidence was contagious.

People called him badass even at that age.

He was bold, street-smart, and always in sports mode.

Football ran in his blood—his brothers, cousins, uncles… all footballers.

Their family didn't just play football.

They breathed it.

And when you were with Chaani, you ran.

We went everywhere.

To the faraway football stadium, crossing backlands and shortcuts known only to the bravest kids.

To wrestling and martial arts clubs, where we got free gymnastics entertainment just by watching from outside.

To ancient parts of the city—hidden gems that most kids never dared to explore.

Noor Market was one of our favorite stops.

A narrow bazaar lined with tall buildings.

They loomed like forgotten palaces from a black-and-white film.

Thousands of pigeons nested in the walls and rooftops.

You'd look up—and for a moment, you'd feel like you were in a painting.

A sky full of birds. A boy full of dreams.

It was the kind of place that made you fall in love with your city.

Another historic marvel was the Maan Singh Gate—an old wooden architecture from the British era.

It stood there like a relic, quiet but proud, as if still watching over Parachinar's ever-changing streets.

The Parachinar of the late '90s was something else.

The food, oh God, the food—was heavenly.

We couldn't afford to eat at restaurants, but on rare days when Chaani won a football prize, he'd treat us to seekh kebabs with a bottle of Pepsi so cold and fizzy, it hit like lightning.

We'd eat under the open sky like kings.

Back in Imamia Colony, every age group had its own friend circle.

The older boys weren't just friends—they were caretakers of the colony.

They fixed things. Literally.

When an electric transformer burned out, they'd gather funds from every home.

If there was a water issue, they solved it.

If someone passed away, they helped with funeral arrangements.

If there was a religious event, they became organizers overnight.

It wasn't just community.

It was family.

One of the most famous figures among them was Mehdi—but no one called him just Mehdi.

They called him "2 Mehdi".

Because there were other boys with the same name.

And he was twice the size of any of them.

Tall. Massive. Loud-voiced. Unmistakable.

He was the kind of guy who could carry a speaker on his shoulder and chant a Noha with a voice that shook windows.

These were the men who kept the soul of Imamia Colony alive—through grief, celebration, and crisis.

School life was still part of my rhythm.

We had four teachers at that time, but one name stayed with me more than the others:

Master Asad Ali.

He was our class teacher for three straight years, and whether it was by fate or favoritism, he never let go of our class.

He was a dark-skinned, strong-built man, always wearing a white Chitrali topi and walking with a limp, caused by some lingering illness in his foot.

Some days, he was gentle and soft-spoken, and we would feel seen —respected, even loved.

He'd crack a joke, smile at our work, nod with a look that said, "You're doing well."

And just when we began to relax…

He'd snap.

He'd grab the stick and beat boys like animals.

The line between love and fear was as thin as chalk dust in that classroom.

Not everything in our childhood was built around books or football.

Some of it was made of fantasies.

The kind that only children believe with full faith.

One of those moments arrived when our class monitor, Qanbar, got married.

Yes, in 4th grade.

He was still a little boy, barely old enough to tie his own shoes properly. But tradition doesn't always wait for adulthood.

We were ecstatic.

We pooled whatever coins and sweets we had and arranged a garland for him.

We walked behind him like we were his best men, proud and confused and excited.

At that age, marriage felt like a magical shortcut to adulthood.

Qanbar was a hero—and we all wanted to follow him.

We began imagining our own weddings, imagining brides with perfect hair and gentle eyes.

Some of us even tried to choose who that bride might be.

In my case, I thought I had found her.

She lived in a neighboring house in Imamia Colony, right next to my close friend Anwar.

Anwar's home was a large compound with just one muddy room and a wide courtyard—the kind of place where you could hear every voice, every step, every emotion.

He had red, teary eyes and tight curly hair, and he lived with a simplicity that made me comfortable there.

But the real reason I kept going to his house every day…

was her.

A girl from the neighborhood, who often played there with Anwar's sister.

I won't name her.

Because names have power.

And this story is not about her.

It’s about me trying to be something more than I was.

I tried everything to impress her—mimicking actors, doing silly dances, cracking dumb jokes.

None of it worked.

Her face made it clear:

She didn’t like me.

Not even a little.

But I kept showing up.

Kept trying.

Because at that age, we didn’t know the difference between love and hope.

And I hoped she’d change her mind.

I imagined, in my childish fantasy, that I would get married just like Qanbar did—young and victorious, with everyone clapping around

me.

But of course, that never happened.

Time passed, and so did the crush.

She faded into the background of my memory, and life moved on.

Soon, we faced our Grade 4 final exams.

Despite the distractions, despite the emotional storms inside me, I stayed true to one thing:

I was always the brightest student in the class.

My teachers knew it.

My classmates respected it.

And maybe—just maybe—that recognition was what kept me going through the waves of inferiority complex I was always swimming in.

And then, one day, it happened:

The last day of primary school.

It was over.

The third graders organized a small farewell party for us—the outgoing class.

Each of us got a cup of tea and a small piece of cake.

It may not sound like much now.

But to us, it was a royal banquet.

Tea and cake were luxuries.

And that day, we felt like we mattered.

After the certificates were handed out and the farewells mumbled awkwardly, the students began to leave, one by one.

But I stayed.

I walked over to Nawroz Mama, the old school watchman with a crooked back and a gentle smile, and made a request:

“Can you keep all the classrooms open for a little while longer?”

He looked at me, nodded, and silently handed me the keys.

That afternoon, I walked alone through the empty corridors.

I visited each of the four classrooms.

Stood in front of every blackboard I once dreaded.

Touched the ink-stained dirty jute rugs.

Smelled the faint ink that lingered on the walls and the Takhtis.

Even the toilets, dirty and neglected, felt like part of something sacred now.

Places I once couldn't wait to escape…

suddenly became places I never wanted to leave.

For the first time, I understood:

This school was not just a building.

It had built me.

And so, before I walked out for the last time,

I whispered to the walls:

"Thank you."

Chapter 11: From Takhti to Notebooks

The year was 2000.

I had just graduated from primary school—that tiny world of four classes, Takhtis, dusty ink-stained jute rugs, and morning lineups—and now, I was walking into something far bigger.

Government High School Parachinar.

The same school where the sectarian war of 1996 had erupted from.

I went for admission all alone.

No one held my hand. No elder guided me. Just me, my certificate, and the sound of a city that was slowly becoming mine.

A teacher sat outside the office, under the shade of a tall tree.

He had a register open on his lap and a calm authority in his posture.

Boys, one after another, were approaching him—handing over their certificates like passports to a new world.

I sat in the queue, heart pounding but face steady.

In the distance, the morning assembly echoed through loudspeakers.

Hundreds of voices chanting together.

It felt… official. Grand. As if I were being welcomed into something important.

After the last boy submitted his papers, the teacher stood and announced:

“Your classes start Monday. Be on time.”

It was four days away.

I didn’t rush home.

Instead, I wandered through the school grounds, wide-eyed and slow-footed.

It was huge.

The classrooms stretched like blocks in a city.

Green fields opened in every direction, each one dedicated to a different sport.

The scent of freshly cut grass, the sight of bright flowers along stone paths, the quiet authority of old colonial buildings—it was overwhelming.

I had the same feeling I'd had years ago when we moved from the grid station to the crowded Imamia Colony:

"I am in a different world now."

There were two things we were most excited about as newly promoted students.

First, we were finally saying goodbye to the Takhti.

That wooden writing board had been our curse and our burden—something we washed, dried, and rewrote on every single day.

Its black ink stained our fingers.

Its cracked surface sometimes cut our palms.

And now, we were done with it.

Second, we were finally moving from the ground to the bench.

No more sitting for eight hours on scratchy jute rugs, our backs aching, our legs folded painfully under us.

Now we would sit like real students—on wood, with desks, upright.

It felt like a promotion into a new class of human.

But with all that joy came something else.

Intimidation.

The students here were from all over—boys from every corner of Parachinar, and even from far-flung tribal villages. Some of them had beards. Some were already shaving daily. Some looked like they should be teachers, not classmates.

Even in 5th grade, the boys were big.

It was a clash of sizes, languages, and cultures.

Pashto, Persian, Urdu—all mixed in the schoolyard like a multilingual orchestra.

And I was a little kid among giants.

But the fear wasn't paralyzing.

It was the kind of fear that excites you, that tells you you're growing.

At home, things had changed too.

My mother was stitching our new black uniforms, cutting fabric with the calm precision of someone who'd done this all her life.

My father had already bought the fabric for both me and Aamir, who was still in Class 3 at the old primary school.

This time felt different.

For once, we were not struggling to afford the books or sew school bags from scrap cloth.

Two of my elder sisters had jobs now—one as a teacher, another

working in the health department.

The financial pressure had eased just enough to allow some breathing room.

We had even bought a black-and-white television, and our house—though still humble—now had a few pieces of wooden furniture.

The air inside felt lighter, brighter.

A day later, my father took me to Maisam Books, a new shop on School Road, just down from the famous Khyber Books.

They were offering 10% off, and a cheap school bag came free with the books.

We bought what we needed.

I held the bag tightly all the way home—not just because it carried books, but because it carried possibility.

Monday couldn't come fast enough.

I had no idea what that new school would bring.

But I knew I was ready to find out.

Chapter 12: Becoming Someone

Finally, Monday morning arrived.

The day I had been waiting for.

I woke up early, took a bath, had my breakfast, and wore my new black Kashmiri uniform, freshly stitched by my mother. It had a certain scent—a newness that made me feel special. It wasn't perfume. It was hope woven into fabric.

One thing I still hated, though, was the black cap—a remnant from our primary school days. Unfortunately, it was still mandatory in high school. But I had learned to live with it.

The good thing?

I wasn't carrying a Takhti anymore.

No more ink stains. No more washing. No more scrubbing mud on wood every night.

I was free.

My new school, Government High School Parachinar, was about two kilometers from my home. So I began the walk alone, my new bag slung over my shoulder, my head full of thoughts I couldn't quite organize.

Near Zeran Chowk, I passed a familiar scene—dozens of daily-wage laborers, mostly construction workers, sitting along the roadside, waiting to be hired. Faces weathered by sun and time. Hands calloused. Eyes empty of morning excitement.

And then there were the other students—not from my school, but from elite private schools.

They were neat and polished, walking with a kind of effortless confidence, wearing their English-style uniforms, complete with crested blazers and clean shoes. Most weren't walking—they were being dropped off in dedicated vans and private cars.

Every time I saw them, my old friend came back.

Inferiority .

It never really left. It just changed shape.

But somehow, I kept walking. I flowed with the crowd, pretending not to care.

As I got closer to school, I passed through the auto mechanic market—a place where children younger than me worked in greasy overalls, faces smeared with oil, shirts blackened to the point you couldn't tell their original color.

Looking at them, something shifted in me.

The inferiority I felt... began to fade a little.

"At least I'm going to school," I whispered to myself.

"Maybe they don't have dreams. But I do. I want to be somebody."

Soon, I was joined by more students walking in the same direction —boys from different villages and neighborhoods, also heading to the high school.

One boy came up beside me.

Short, with reddish watery eyes, walking with two of his cousins.

"New admission?" he asked.

“Yes,” I replied.

“Fifth class?”

“Yes.”

He smiled. “Me too. I’m Ghadeer.”

He told me he lived near the football stadium, almost six kilometers away, and that this was the only school worth attending. His cousins nodded along.

And just like that, I had made my first friend in high school.

As we reached the school, its giant iron gate towered above us.

I felt the same urge I used to feel in primary school.

So I stepped forward, leaned in, and kissed the gate—quietly, with reverence.

This wasn’t just a habit.

It was a promise I was making to myself.

Inside, hundreds of new students were gathered.

Ghadeer, his cousins, and I sat near the massive football ground, watching older students warm up for their morning matches. We exchanged stories about our old schools, laughed about Takhtis and teachers, and waited for the next instruction.

Then I saw familiar faces walking toward me.

Qanbar. Irshad.

And then more boys from my primary school.

I can't describe the relief and joy that rushed through me.

The world had suddenly become less strange.

The morning assembly began.

A senior student, confident and loud, led the exercises from a mic on the stage, his voice booming through giant loudspeakers. Over a thousand students stood in lines across the open ground.

"Stand at ease!" he shouted.

We spread our legs, hands folded behind us.

"Attention!"

We snapped our legs together, arms at our sides.

The instructions repeated several times. The rhythm became familiar.

Then came the Quran recitation. Then the National Anthem—thousands of voices rising as one, backed by the trembling speakers.

It felt... epic.

Like standing in the middle of something bigger than all of us.

But school life wasn't just anthem and awe.

After the anthem, the absent students were punished—two lashes each, publicly, in front of the whole school.

The silence after each lash was louder than the anthem.

Then came a man with a calm face and commanding voice.

Mr. Ibrar Hussain, the principal.

He welcomed the new fifth graders, then immediately warned us:

"Study seriously. This is not a place for wasting time."

The message was clear.

This wasn't primary school anymore.

Then another teacher came to the mic.

"There are two sections for Class 5," he announced.

Section A would be the larger group—around 70 students.

Section B, the smaller group—with 40 students.

I found my name on the list.

I was in Section B.

When I finally walked into my assigned classroom—Section B—my excitement dipped.

There they were.

The same old jute rugs again.

Worn, fraying at the edges, with that familiar smell of dust, sweat, and time.

"Benches start from sixth class," someone whispered.

So, once again, I folded my legs under me and sat on the ground—

just like in primary school. But now I was taller, older, and it hurt more.

Our class teacher was Master Ikhtiar.

A kind-eyed man with a gentle smile.

He spoke softly, looked everyone in the eye, and never raised his voice unnecessarily.

He felt like a breeze in a world of slaps and sticks.

But not all teachers were like him.

Some were harsh—just like in the old days—quick to humiliate, quick to hit, slow to listen.

Luckily, I had learned how to survive in such environments:

Answer questions. Sit straight. Stay sharp.

That very first week, I answered some tough questions confidently —and that was it.

I had earned their respect.

I was placed in their “good books.”

In schools like ours, that meant survival.

Then came lunch break.

I reached into my pocket and pulled out two rupees.

At the school canteen, that bought me half a naan and one samosa, drowned in a thin, watery mint chutney.

The taste?

Heaven .

In that moment, with the chutney soaking through my bread, it felt like I was eating in a palace.

When I returned to class, two boys approached me.

Farhad and Irshad.

Farhad had noticed me during the lesson. He was tall and broad with dark skin, a nose full of wild hair, and a serious presence.

Irshad was the opposite—slim, small, red-cheeked, and playful, almost like a reflection of myself.

They introduced themselves.

They lived in Noor Market flats, close to the Central City Imam Bargah.

That day, we became friends.

And by the time school ended, I had already started calling them my best friends.

We walked home together until our paths split—one toward their housing blocks, the other toward Imamia Colony.

A few days later, I met Mujahid—a boy who brought laughter wherever he went.

He had a hilarious way of talking, always joking, always mimicking someone, always telling stories.

He wasn't just funny. He was healing.

But still, Farhad and Irshad were my closest.

We studied together, walked together, and shared our little victories together.

One afternoon, I spotted a familiar face in the school courtyard.

Nadeem.

He was a senior now, but he had once lived in the old Grid Station quarters, where my story had begun.

He was holding a book—a small paperback with an illustration on the cover.

“Where did you get that?” I asked.

“From the school library,” he replied casually.

Library?

The word struck me like thunder.

“Take me there,” I pleaded.

He smiled and led me.

The librarian was a kind, calm man. His room smelled of old paper, wood, and secrets.

Nadeem whispered to him and handed me a suggestion.

A book about Hatim Tai—the legendary fictional hero who traveled lands, solved impossible riddles, and helped the helpless.

I checked it out.

That night, I devoured it.

And that was the day I became a reader.

Thanks to Nadeem.

Thanks to Hatim.

Thanks to the kind librarian who didn't say no.

From that day forward, books became my escape hatch, my mirror, my mentor.

But school wasn't all stories and samosas.

There were other boys—violent, morally twisted even at that young age.

They bullied. They threatened. They fought outside school walls like grown men.

And they targeted me.

I didn’t understand their cruelty. But it scared me.

I stayed focused on my studies, determined to rise above them.

And I did.

Top of the class. Every time.

Still, their presence clouded my joy. I was growing. But I wasn’t safe.

Then came another blow.

Our landlord in Imamia Colony sent an eviction notice.

It was happening all over the city—landlords evicting tenants for a small rise in rent, just to give the property to someone who could pay more.

This was the era of the Afghan refugee influx, and demand for rental homes was high.

I didn’t care about economics.

All I knew was—I was losing my home again.

My father started searching.

We didn’t have many options.

The only place we could afford…

was near the neighborhood of those same violent boys who tormented me at school.

I didn’t want to move.

Not just because I was afraid.

But because I was in love with Imamia Colony.

That dusty, congested colony… it was home.

But life doesn’t always care what we love.

And before the month ended, we packed our things again,

and left behind another chapter of our lives.

Chapter 13: The Haunting Goodbye

I was falling in love with Imamia Colony more than ever before.

Just as we were preparing to leave it.

The streets I once feared had become mine.

The dusty playground, the Imam Bargah, the people, the routines—it was all becoming a home written into my bones.

But we had to move.

The night before shifting, I went alone to the shrine of Agha-e-Irani and the nearby Imam Bargah.

I placed my hand gently on the cool metal of the shrine gate and whispered a child's impossible wish:

"Ya Allah, give us enough money to buy our home. Tonight. Somehow."

But miracles were rare in our part of the world.

So we returned to our packed rugs and slept one last night in the

only place that had ever truly felt like home.

In the morning, the tractor cart arrived.

We began loading our belongings—our world in stitched bags and wooden boxes. There was more stuff this time: a sign we had grown. So the tractor had to make two trips to move it all.

We were headed to a new house on Dandar Road.

It had three rooms—an upgrade from the last one—and was built better, more polished.

But to me, it felt like I was being relocated to a zoo.

Because the neighborhood… was home to those boys.

They weren't just rough or loud.

They were dangerous.

And worse, they were morally rotten.

Parachinar had long buried its women behind black veils and unspoken laws. Girls weren't allowed to be seen, let alone be

known. They wore full-body burqas, their faces covered, their voices hidden.

The result?

The city turned its desire inward.

Boys started liking boys.

It was everywhere—in schools, in villages, in alleys behind mosques.

And I… I was the kind of boy they looked for.

Young. Quiet. Alone.

But I had something they didn't—dignity.

And I guarded it like a sword.

By afternoon, the last cartload reached our new home.

As we unpacked, I met Hassnain—the landlord's elder son.

He was just one year senior to me at school and seemed friendly, clean-cut, and intelligent.

Their family had even cooked us a welcome lunch—a rare gesture of warmth in a world that often offered us none.

Over lunch, Hassnain told me about his dream.

He was preparing to gain admission in Cadet College Razmak—one of the most prestigious military boarding schools in the country.

“My cousin already studies there,” he said, with quiet pride.

“He’s training to be something great.”

He told me about life in hostel—midnight raids, early morning drills, brotherhood, and discipline. The education, the uniforms, the respect.

I listened like someone hearing a fable.

I wanted to meet his cousin.

I wanted to be him.

Then, like thunder breaking a dream, my mother’s voice rang from

inside:

“The Irani carpet! It’s missing!”

Panic .

She had rolled it up and left it behind a door in the backroom of our old house—the one no one visited. It had been forgotten in the shuffle.

The carpet was new. And it meant something.

I turned to Hassnain.

“Will you come with me?”

He nodded without hesitation.

We borrowed a wheelbarrow and began the one-kilometer walk back to Imamia Colony.

The sun had just set.

The streets were cooling. The shadows were long.

And then… I saw them.

My old friends, still playing in the same dusty lot near our former home.

Nothing had changed. Except me.

We walked to the pharmacy, got the spare keys, and opened the door.

The home was dark.

Silent. Hollow.

It felt like walking into the body of someone you once loved—now lifeless, cold, and unfamiliar.

My voice echoed in the empty rooms.

I found the carpet. Still rolled up. Still perfect.

I didn’t want to cry.

But my throat clenched.

My body trembled.

And then… I sat down.

Right there, in the middle of the room.

And I cried.

I cried for what we lost.

I cried for the home that was no longer mine.

I cried because I felt small again.

Hassnain stood beside me in silence.

Then he gently placed his hand on my head.

“You’re a big boy now,” he said softly.

“Big boys don’t cry.”

I nodded, wiped my tears on the hem of my shirt, picked up the carpet, and loaded it onto the wheelbarrow.

We walked home in silence.

We didn't speak for the rest of the night.

Imamia Colony had become a ghost.

And I had become someone who saw ghosts everywhere.

That new home on Dandar Road—it did something to me.

Something irreversible.

I began to change.

First quietly. Then, completely.

I became deeply religious .

I started praying five times a day, and even woke in the middle of the night for Tahajjud—the prayer where, they said, God listens most attentively.

And every night, I whispered the same plea:

"Ya Allah, give us money. Help us move back to Imamia Colony.

Please... get us out of here."

The days passed with the usual school routine.

Hassnain, my landlord's son, walked with me every morning.

We talked about Cadet College and hostel life and books.

But beneath that, I was battling something bigger.

The badass boys knew I lived nearby now.

They had their eyes on me.

Their immorality was well-known.

They didn't just intimidate—they preyed.

In a society where women were hidden, and desire was forbidden, many turned to other boys—younger boys—to satisfy their frustrated fantasies.

I was careful.

I kept my head down.

But that wasn't enough.

One day, as I left home, one of them bumped into me intentionally —shoulder to shoulder.

Then he grabbed my neck.

“How dare you hit me!” he shouted, before slapping me across the face.

I hadn’t touched him.

I was stunned.

He wanted to humiliate me. He wanted to establish dominance.

People nearby broke us apart.

But that night, I couldn’t sleep.

I cried. I prayed. I begged God to save me.

And then... something inside me snapped.

After Tahajjud, I stood up and whispered to myself:

“Tomorrow, I will fight back—even if they kill me.”

That night, I had another horror dream.

The nightmares had become a nightly ritual in the new house.

Strange, terrifying, suffocating dreams.

Sometimes I woke drenched in sweat.

Sometimes I didn’t want to fall asleep at all.

But morning came.

And I walked into school with a decision already made.

The boy who had slapped me was smirking, whispering to another friend:

“That’s the guy I slapped yesterday.”

I walked up to him and stared directly into his face.

“Stop staring at me,” I said, voice trembling but steady.

“Or I won’t spare you next time.”

He laughed.

He pushed me.

So I punched him in the face.

Chaos erupted.

Other boys ran toward us. A teacher came and stopped the fight.

And—for once—justice was done.

Two lashes for him.

Two for me.

But that wasn’t enough.

After school, I went home, grabbed a sharp pen, and walked straight to the poultry stall where he worked with his father.

He was there.

I didn’t wait.

I ran at him and struck him with the pen—it bounced off, but I kept going.

I grabbed him.

And beat him the way I had imagined a hundred times.

People gathered and separated us. His father came to our home, furious.

But I told my story. My father listened.

From that day on, those boys still looked at me with hatred.

But they never touched me again.

Yet even with this small victory, the inferiority complex remained.

I was still poor. Still vulnerable. Still different.

I passed my 5th class exams, quietly carrying all of this within me.

Chapter 14: The Good Eviction

And then came another eviction notice—less than a year since we moved in.

The landlord's relatives were coming from the village, and we had to leave.

But this eviction notice was a nice turning point. It was a plan, planned in heavens, made for innocent souls.

Finding a house was harder than ever.

Finally, my father found a first-floor flat, newly constructed and still under construction.

The builder had promised completion—but delays meant we had to move in early.

We lived with wet walls, cement dust, and leaking pipes.

But it was ours—for now.

Then, in the midst of dust and dampness, light broke through.

My 5th class result was announced.

I had topped the class.

We were living among bricks and scaffolding, but that moment made it feel like a palace.

Soon, the walls dried. The house began to shine.

My sisters added curtains and decoration.

We bought more furniture.

And for the first time, we bought a color TV.

This house, too, began to feel like home.

In the basement of our new building was a Martial Arts Club.

The sounds of kicks, shouts, and discipline echoed up the stairs each evening.

The instructor was Ustaad Afzal—a tall, muscular, Persian-speaking man from Afghanistan with eyes that saw everything and a voice that could split the air.

I watched from the stairs in awe.

One day, I asked my father if I could join.

He agreed—and even negotiated half-fee since we were now neighbors.

From the very first session, I was hooked.

Taekwondo became my therapy, my focus, my fire.

I trained hard.

I learned fast.

And soon, Ustaad Afzal gave me administrative duties—taking daily attendance and collecting fees.

I no longer had to pay tuition.

I was earning respect instead.

The martial arts gave me more than strength.

It gave me confidence.

I was becoming strategic, sharp, and composed.

My circle expanded. I met boys from working-class backgrounds, small business owners, shopkeepers.

Even Ustaad Afzal ran a popcorn shop in the city. It was more like a tiny popcorn factory. Popcorn was part of every ritual in Parachinar. So it had a big market size.

He was a fighter—and a businessman.

And I admired him deeply.

We began to love this home.

And slowly, very slowly…

Imamia Colony became a memory.

Chapter 15: Knowing Tech and Entrepreneurship

Martial arts did more than teach me how to fight.

It taught me how to think.

It shaped my mind, groomed my personality, and slowly chipped away the fear that had followed me like a shadow for years.

I was becoming confident—sharper, more strategic, more focused.

The club was filled with a very different breed of boys—fighters by evening, workers by day.

Many of them were running small businesses in Parachinar city.

Some sold vegetables, some ran meat or fruit shops, others owned clothing stalls or small electronics corners.

They weren't rich, but they were self-made, and they carried a kind of freedom that I didn't see in salaried people. Driving a van was not rewarding at all.

Even our instructor, Ustaad Afzal, ran a popcorn shop in the city. It was like a tiny factory of popcorn.

And he was doing well.

Popcorn wasn't just a snack in our town.

It was a gift—a wedding essential, a celebratory treat.

There was demand, and Afzal had turned it into income.

I watched all this with curiosity.

Because back home, my father was driving a van, breaking his back for a handful of rupees, while these men were making more, doing less backbreaking work.

That's when a thought was born.

“Why can’t we run something too?”

I started brainstorming ideas—tiny businesses we could run as a family.

It was the beginning of something I would later understand as the birth of entrepreneurship in me.

I didn’t know the word then.

But I knew the feeling.

Meanwhile, I was changing in other ways too.

By the time I reached Class 7, I had started reading mature literature—novels, biographies, even English newspapers and magazines.

The school library was small and understocked.

Every time I visited, I left frustrated. I wanted more. I wanted depth.

We had another library in the city, but that too was understocked.

I had also begun watching Hollywood films, slowly developing a

sense for language, dialogue, and narrative.

We had a VCR in our home by then. And there were tens of video cassette shops in Parachinar. They had a good variety of Hollywood movies. And they rented the cassettes for 10 rupees for 24 hours.

Books made me wiser.

Movies taught me rhythm.

Both were my teachers.

And then came Qaiser.

He didn’t enter my life like a character.

He entered like a brother.

We met in school, but it felt like we were meant to meet.

Qaiser was a martial arts student like me, but he was also obsessed with the English language.

He had joined a local language institute run by a man named Toor Gull, who had become a sensation in Parachinar.

Every "cool" boy in town was rushing to learn English under Toor Gull.

Thousands had enrolled.

Qaiser was one of the lucky few.

His family supported him well.

His elder brother worked abroad, and they ran an LPG gas business locally.

Qaiser had books, classes, tutors—everything I didn't have.

But he lacked one thing:

Natural spark.

He was hardworking, yes.

But not genius. Not quick.

He couldn't impress me intellectually.

Still, our bond grew strong.

We walked together, sparred together, shared books, argued about grammar, memorized vocabulary, and dreamed.

While Qaiser followed formal language instruction,

I hunted the language in wild places.

I read. I listened. I watched.

Hollywood became my classroom.

Magazines were my textbooks.

And libraries were my universities.

Qaiser remained deeply religious.

While I, slowly, was returning from the extreme religiosity that had consumed me after the Dandar Road trauma.

By Class 7, I had started to balance.

Not rejecting faith—but rediscovering my own rhythm within it.

One day, Qaiser invited me to visit the computer institute where he was taking a short course.

I didn’t know what to expect.

But when I walked through the glass door and saw a computer—a real computer—for the first time in my life, I froze.

It looked like a machine from another world.

Tall. Wide. Glowing. Whispering.

Qaiser turned it on.

Windows 98 appeared on the screen. The startup sound felt like an anthem from the future.

And then came the moment.

He opened something called MS Word.

“Type your name,” he said, nudging me forward.

I stretched out my fingers, trembling slightly, and typed:

Qamar Abbas

My name lit up in black font on a blank white screen.

But then Qaiser took the mouse, clicked around, and added shadows, colors, curves.

I had never seen my name like that before—not on a notebook, not in ink, not anywhere.

It was beautiful.

Digital calligraphy.

And it felt like magic.

The institute was run by Ishtihar Agha, a kind man with a trimmed beard and a business smile. He had hired a young, soft-spoken instructor named Naib.

Naib looked familiar.

He was from Imamia Colony.

I went to him and whispered in awe, “This Windows thing is amazing.”

Naib smiled.

“It’s called Windows,” he said. “It’s made by a company called Microsoft.”

Then he added something that would change my thinking forever:

“Microsoft is owned by the richest man on Earth. His name is Bill Gates. He was very poor and then he made Windows which made him the richest”

Wait.

The richest man in the world…

didn’t own gold mines or oil fields…

He owned software?

Something invisible?

Something you couldn’t touch?

I was stunned.

That moment—right there—I fell in love with computers.

And not just with the machine… but with the idea.

I asked Naib if he could give me a discount on the course.

He spoke to Ishtihar Agha.

They agreed.

And just like that, I enrolled.

Then, one fine day, I met Shafaat—a brilliant boy who was miles ahead of all of us. He was perhaps the only serious tech enthusiast in Parachinar back then.

His father was a veterinary doctor.

His brothers worked abroad.

He had a computer at home.

We became friends quickly. He taught me shortcuts. Tricks. Programs. Browsers.

But after a month, I began to feel something I hadn't expected—boredom.

The classes were slow. Repetitive.

I left the course quietly.

Then, one day, Shafaat came to me with an exciting news:

“An internet café has opened in Parachinar.”

I looked at him blankly.

“What’s internet?” I asked.

His eyes lit up.

He began telling me about Yahoo Messenger, chat rooms, emails, websites, the world online.

I agreed to go.

He promised to make me a Yahoo ID.

The café was dimly lit, the air filled with the soft whirr of CPUs and the glow of CRT screens.

Each computer was inside a separate wooden cabin. A secret portal.

We entered one, sat down, and Shafaat logged in.

He opened Yahoo Messenger and entered a chat room.

Strangers from across the world appeared on screen.

People were talking. Making friends. Sharing jokes.

He bounced between rooms. Sent messages. Got replies. Smiled like he had entered a secret society.

Then, just before our hour ended, he created an ID for me.

He scribbled the username and password on a small scrap of paper and handed it to me like he was passing a key to a new world.

I wrote down a few websites I'd seen. Folded the paper. Slipped it in my pocket.

And walked out feeling…

Different.

Like I had stepped into the future—and left my village behind.

After that, I started visiting the café once a week.

Twenty rupees for one hour.

Every visit felt like crossing the border into a new universe.

I read about business, finance, and entrepreneurship.

I learned about billion-dollar companies, stock markets, and venture capital.

I would sit there multiplying American wealth by the rupee conversion rate and wonder:

“Where are we in all this?”

It was clear—we were nowhere.

Forgotten.

Buried.

Not even a dot on the global map.

But I didn’t let it make me bitter.

It made me hungry.

I started dreaming big.

Not just for survival.

But for change.

Chapter 16: Whispers of a Bigger World

It was the year 2002, and my life had settled into a strange, rhythmic dance—school during the day, martial arts in the evening, stolen hours on the internet whenever I could, and nights spent dreaming of a life that seemed galaxies away. I was no longer the boy who once sat wide-eyed at the edge of the playground—I was growing sharper, faster, more curious. My heart beat not just with ambition, but with hunger. A hunger to know, to create, to become.

Beyond our quiet struggles, the world was changing too.

America had stormed into Afghanistan, and the ripples reached even our secluded Parachinar. Refugees were being told to leave. General Musharraf's announcement echoed through our bazaar radios like a warning bell: go back, or face the consequences. Among those who packed their lives and left was Ustaad Afzal. He closed the martial arts club and sold his popcorn business. Just like that, the place that had been my sanctuary—the echo of our synchronized movements, the discipline, the brotherhood—it vanished.

That void was followed by another blow. We received an eviction notice. Again.

This time, we shifted into a place that could barely be called a home—a crumbling mud house with only two rooms. The floor was cold, the walls wept in the rain, and the ceiling hung low like a burden. It was a dip—sharp, painful, and unforgiving. Unlike before, we couldn't rise from it. Not immediately.

But hope is a stubborn thing. We had heard whispers of government-allotted homes near the Cantonment area—a place of neat roads, manicured trees, and the soft dignity of order. We clung to that dream. My father wrote application after application, and we made rounds to the offices, following up with the desperation of those who had nothing left to lose.

Then, in 2003, in the middle of my 8th grade year, something miraculous happened: we were allotted a government house—for twenty years.

When we first saw it, our breath caught in our throats. It stood like an old lion—weathered, proud, and vast. Two portions. The upper portion, where we would live, had four

rooms, their tin roofs rusted and leaking. The lower portion, freshly built, had six rooms gleaming with polished floors and wide windows. We rented that part to a doctor for his clinic. The rent covered the cost of the entire house, so we could live upstairs—free, but not quite dry.

Rain became our enemy. The roof gave in like an old man's back, and no number of pots or buckets could hold the tears it shed. But it was ours. A big house. A roof, however leaky, over our heads. That meant something.

We still lived in an era before mobile phones. When you wanted to meet a friend, you walked. Sometimes for miles. And if they weren't home, you just walked back. That was the gamble. That was the innocence of Parachinar.

One afternoon, Qaiser came to me, his eyes glowing with mischief and excitement. He had saved some money.

"Let's go to Peshawar," he said, like it was a casual stroll.

My heart skipped. *Peshawar?* The name itself was legendary. In our minds, it was not a city—it was a universe. Tall buildings, fast lives, endless roads. A place you could disappear into. A place where the future already lived.

When I asked my family, they hesitated, fearing for our safety. But eventually, they relented—with one condition: we stay together and never let go of each other's hands.

So, on a chilly morning before sunrise, Qaiser arrived at my door. He was lugging a massive suitcase like he was crossing continents. I had only a tiny backpack—borrowed from my

sister Basmeen—carrying three neatly folded suits.

We began the seven-hour journey through winding roads and rough terrain. As we neared Peshawar, the first things that hit us were the suffocating smoke of rickshaws, the sticky heat, and a strange mix of scents—some foul, some floral. But none of that could dampen our spirits. We were wide-eyed explorers, drunk on freedom.

We checked into Pak Hotel, a dusty little place nestled in the heart of Qissa Khwani Bazaar. It was more than a hotel—it was a legacy of our people. Built by donations from the community and managed by the Central City Imambargah, it offered subsidized stays for Parachinaris. Our room was old, the sheets stained, but it was our launchpad into a wider world.

Qissa Khwani itself was a contradiction—chaotic and charming. The flower sellers lined the narrow alleys, their stalls bursting with color and scent. Roses, tuberose, and marigolds floated in the air like music in a dirty symphony.

With our to-do list in hand, we hit the city.

We visited Army Stadium, a colorful playland that stretched out like a dream. Then came Islamia College and the sprawling campus of Peshawar University—grand buildings that once starred in our textbook illustrations. I had once dreamed of studying here, but my path had shifted toward commerce, economics, and finance. Still, the grandeur of it left me awestruck.

We walked the hallways of Lady Reading Hospital, our minds echoing with the literature we'd read in Urdu textbooks. Every

place we'd once studied about—we now walked through.

But the real magic waited in Hayatabad.

Nothing prepared me for it.

The wide, tree-lined roads. The manicured parks. The majestic bungalows behind ornate gates. My obsession with beautiful homes came alive in Hayatabad—it was like stepping into a movie. I kept looking at each house, imagining what it would be like to live in one. Maybe this longing came from never really having a home that stayed—each move, each eviction, had left me hungrier for stability.

But Hayatabad didn't just give me dreams of houses. It gave me a vision of the future.

Mobile phones. Everywhere. In glass displays, on streets, in the hands of rickshaw drivers. Shiny, glowing Nokias—some basic, some with cameras. The kind we had only seen in magazines. In Parachinar, no one had a mobile phone. Most hadn't even seen one. We didn't have rickshaws either—our steep, mountainous roads made them impractical.

And then, Gul Haji Plaza.

A temple for the tech-obsessed.

I had heard about it from Shafaat, but the real thing was overwhelming. Floor after floor, shop after shop, filled with computers—sleek machines that looked like spacecraft to me. Some had price tags dangling from them. Others displayed

signs offering easy installment plans.

I stood there frozen. Not in envy. In resolve.

After four days of roaming, we returned home.

Back in school, we shared our story with the class. It was like we'd returned from the moon. The students hung onto our every word—eyes wide, jaws dropped. No one could believe we had actually gone. On our own. Seen the world. And come back alive.

But the moment that stunned them most was the mobile phone. "There's no wire?" they gasped.

"And even rickshaw drivers have them?" someone asked, eyes popping.

"Even rickshaws?" another echoed. Most had never seen one.

Parachinar was frozen in time. But I was not.

Something inside me had shifted. My world had grown. My dreams, too.

And I knew—I would never let them shrink again.

Chapter 14: Unnamed Emotions

I wasn't sure if I should include this chapter. For days, I hesitated—torn between silence and sincerity. But I had promised myself before I began writing this story: I would be honest, even if it meant revealing parts of myself I never fully understood. So, I will speak—not to shock, not to confess, but to reflect. Maybe someone, somewhere, will read this and understand their own story better.

In our school, there existed an invisible thread—a quiet, unspoken phenomenon. Among the boys, sometimes, there were bonds that ran deeper than friendship. Not physical, not perverse, but intensely emotional. A kind of affection that didn't fit the mold of normal boyhood camaraderie. It was confusing, because no one ever named it. And yet, everyone knew it existed.

Some boys were admired, adored—idolized even. If one happened to be good-looking, it wasn't rare to see dozens of others captivated by his presence. He'd be called *beautiful* , not just *handsome* . And beauty, in our world, was powerful. It could rearrange friendships, stir emotions, and shake identities.

It happened to me too.

There was a friend—someone I played cricket with, someone who shared the same seriousness about school and life. He was quiet, focused, and had an aura that drew people in. Then

suddenly, the class began to notice him. They whispered about his looks, praised his every movement, and called him “beautiful” with a kind of awe.

And something shifted inside me.

I began to see him differently. I didn’t want to—tried to ignore it—but I couldn’t. My emotions betrayed me. It was not attraction the way people often think of it. There was no sexual urge, no perverse desire. But it was not normal friendship either.

I wanted to be around him all the time. I thought about him constantly. And when I stood before him, my confidence crumbled like a paper wall. I couldn’t meet his eyes. My voice trembled. I became someone I didn’t recognize.

During the winter break, I made the excuse of borrowing his notebook. His house was miles away, but I didn’t care. I just wanted to see him again. I walked the distance, borrowed the book for two days, then returned it—only to get another glimpse of him.

It felt strange and heavy—this emotional dependence. I had once disapproved of such behavior in others, quietly labeling them weak or confused. But now, I was becoming what I didn’t understand.

Still, I knew—just like them, I was not gay. Nor were they. In the years that followed, I watched those boys marry, raise children, live heterosexual lives. I am sure their orientation was never in question. So, what was it?

I think now it was the environment. The structure of our society. We were raised in deeply segregated spaces, where boys spent their lives with other boys, where emotional expression had no outlet, and admiration had nowhere to go but inward. In that tight-knit, emotionally deprived world, even friendship could become something... more. It was never physical. It was psychological.

I write this not to expose, but to understand. To let the reader glimpse a strange yet very real part of boyhood in certain societies—where emotions are repressed, where admiration becomes obsession, and where love is never spoken, only felt in silence.

That was my emotional state in eighth and ninth grade.

But life, as always, moved forward.

Classes turned serious. Ninth and tenth grade were no longer internal assessments—they were governed by the Kohat Board, an institution that supervised the exams of hundreds of schools. Board exams carried weight. They shaped your future. The colleges you dreamed of, the scholarships you chased, the careers you envisioned—all depended on those results.

I was ready.

My preparation had begun long before most. My study time was short but sharp. I had developed a method—targeted, efficient, relentless. What others did in twelve hours, I could do in four. Not because I was special, but because I had learned how to focus.

But there was one great disappointment: my teachers.

They were dull-minded, uninspired, and in many cases, unqualified. I looked at them and felt a strange grief. These were the people meant to shape our minds, and yet, they barely had control over their own. Some openly encouraged bribery. Others promised us good marks— *if* we played the game.

That game was cheating.

It wasn't just tolerated. It was promoted. Students were told to collect money, bribe invigilators, pass answer sheets like notes in class. Some even memorized cheat codes more than textbooks. And the worst part? It worked. Those who paid and cheated scored higher than those who didn't.

But I couldn't play that game. Not because I was noble, but because I was terrible at cheating.

I hated the injustice of it all. I hated the sight of my classmates, proudly handing over cash to teachers who were supposed to be our moral compass. I hated that honesty made me the outsider. But still, I chose it. I had to.

Then came 2004. The exam season.

The halls were packed. Papers distributed. Tension thick in the air. And then, the deals began. Invigilators walked between rows, looking for the nods—the silent signs from students who had "arranged" their cheating. They turned a blind eye as pages turned and chits were passed.

I sat in the middle of it all, refusing to look left or right.

Maybe I was the only one in that room who didn't cheat.

The exams ended. We threw a farewell party for the outgoing tenth graders. Laughter filled the air. But underneath the celebration, I carried a quiet pride.

Then, the results were announced.

I had topped the class.

My scores were proof—not just of intelligence, but of integrity. I had fought a crooked system, and I had won.

In that moment, I realized something: even if the world was unfair, I didn’t have to be.

And perhaps, that is where greatness begins.

Chapter 17: The Last Bell

Tenth grade—our final year at Government High School Parachinar.

It was strange how a place I once found ordinary, even harsh, had slowly become my haven. I had started falling in love with my school—not just the memories we made, but the very walls, the dirty benches, the worn-out blackboards. There was something sacred about that mess. Perhaps it was nostalgia, or maybe it was the ache of knowing I was nearing the end of this chapter.

Tenth grade had its own charm. Some boys, who had hidden behind silence for years, suddenly revealed their humor. The class clowns were born just as we were about to leave. Their jokes were like fireworks in a sky that had been gray for too long.

And yet, beneath the laughter, I was more serious than ever. My mind had already started to drift beyond Parachinar. I was spending late evenings on the internet at the local café, researching different fields of study. The traditional routes—medicine or engineering—never spoke to me. I wanted to learn about business, finance, the systems that moved money and power in the world. There was a commerce college in Parachinar, sure, but I wanted more. I wanted out. I wanted exposure, challenge—life beyond the mountains.

Peshawar. That was my dream city. A place where possibilities felt endless.

I talked to my family, again and again, trying to convince them. I knew money was tight, but this was my chance. To my surprise, they agreed. My father and sisters decided to support my dream and help me get into a college in Peshawar. That decision filled me with a newfound energy. The horizon

widened. Hope came alive.

Meanwhile, back at school, everything had softened. Even the notorious boys—the “badasses”—had become oddly kind and civil. Maybe leaving was making us all more human. Even the teachers, once so merciless with sticks and slaps, had become gentler. For the first time, it felt like we were truly seen. It was a dream—almost too good to be real.

Then, as always, exams arrived. And the anxiety returned with them.

The long nights of study, the quiet desperation in our eyes, the cold dread outside the exam hall—it was all there again. And so was the cheating. The invigilators, corrupt as ever, welcomed bribes and turned blind eyes. But I, like before, stuck to my way—clear concepts, clean conscience. I didn’t know if it made me brave or foolish, but it felt right. And my papers went well.

When the last exam ended, I stepped out of the hall and stood still, just staring at the building that had been my second home for years. The playground was littered with torn cheating slips. Dust hovered like smoke in the air. Still, it was beautiful to me. I decided I’d say my real goodbye on the day of the farewell party.

The farewell was simple, almost painfully modest. If someone from a Western school or upper-class background tried to picture it, I’d ask them to imagine a gathering of poor students—wearing their best clothes, sipping tea, nibbling on dry pastries, laughing at old jokes. There were no balloons, no decorations. Just heart.

It was the first time I saw many of my classmates without their black school caps, their hair neatly combed, their clothes ironed. It made me realize how little we had, and how much we made out of it.

After the farewell, I took a slow walk around the school, reliving every class I had sat in—from fifth grade to tenth. I visited my exact seating spot in each room. I stepped into the small, dusty library that had fed my hunger for knowledge. I went to the tree in the playground, the one that offered shade in summer, and I wrapped my arms around it. That tree had heard our laughter, our secrets.

Then the results were announced—I had scored well, again. It was a quiet victory.

But to study in Peshawar, I needed to migrate to a new education board. So I traveled to Kohat and stayed at the home of my mother's paternal uncle. He worked at a bank, and for three days I lived in their modest yet warm house. My cousins Yasir and Nargis were also tenth graders, and they had done well in their exams too. Their school in Kohat was impressive, and so was their city life. It all felt so big, so far from the narrow, dusty roads of Parachinar.

I got my migration certificate and returned home.

Then the day finally came. Qaiser and I packed our bags and left for Peshawar. He got admission in a medical college, the traditional path. I, however, joined a commerce college to study business and finance. Back then, commerce wasn't considered respectable—certainly not as honorable as engineering or medicine. But I knew this was my path.

I submitted my documents. Our classes were to begin in two weeks.

We returned to Parachinar for one last stay.

And just like that, I fell in love again—with the city I was about to leave.

For two weeks, I wandered the streets of Parachinar. Every road, every tree, every wall had meaning. I looked at them as if I was seeing them for the last time. But more than the city, it was my family I couldn't stop thinking about. I was falling in love with them all over again—my father, my sisters, my home.

Especially Basmeen.

She was my equal—brilliant, ambitious, but without the privilege of leaving. She had passed tenth grade with flying colors but had no choice but to attend the only girls' college in Parachinar—Benazir College. All our elder sisters had studied there. It was a path worn by footsteps of compromise.

Basmeen and I were close. Perhaps I was the only one she truly talked to. She would sit beside me in silence, gently massaging my head after a long day. I knew she would miss me. And I knew she wouldn't say it.

Then came the morning.

I picked up my bag and stepped out into the cold, silent dawn of Parachinar. The air was crisp, the sky still gray. I walked

out of the house, my heart full. I was leaving behind everything I loved—for something unknown.

Peshawar was hot, noisy, chaotic. That night, I arrived at my hostel and collapsed onto the unfamiliar bed. The college was only 200 meters away, but in my heart, it felt like a thousand miles from everything I'd ever known.

Tomorrow, a new chapter would begin.

But that night, I was still the boy from Parachinar—holding tightly to a memory that was already slipping away.

Chapter 18: The Turning Point

The college building, to my disappointment, lacked the inspiration I had imagined. After dreaming of grand halls and towering campuses, the reality felt underwhelming. It was a small, modest structure—its construction visibly aged and tired. The walls were stained, the paint long forgotten. Rust clung stubbornly to the edges of windows and doors, and the old wooden furniture creaked under the weight of years. It didn't resemble a place of dreams—it looked like a place that had stopped dreaming long ago.

The hostel was no better. A narrow, three-story building that resembled more a prison than a home. Its long corridors echoed with footsteps and murmurs, and the rooms were small and dimly lit. Most of us slept on traditional rope-tied beds—charpoys—which groaned every time someone turned in their sleep. Study tables were a rare luxury, claimed by a few; the rest of us had to read and write lying on our beds or sitting cross-legged on the cold cement floor. There were no study lamps. If one of us wanted to study late into the night, the others had to sacrifice their sleep. The walls were cracked and stained, and the paint had long faded into patches of sorrow. It felt like no one had cared for this building in years.

But there were rays of kindness in this dreary place—Mr. Zia ur Rehman and Mr. Abdul Wahid, our hostel wardens. Mr. Zia was young, full of energy and humor, often joking with students and easing the tension that filled our days. Mr. Abdul Wahid, with his calm demeanor and white beard, was the opposite—soft-spoken, kind, and deeply respected. They were more than just wardens; they were teachers, mentors, and silent supporters.

Beside the hostel lay Shahi Bagh, an old public park that became our evening refuge. On the days homesickness gripped us hardest, we would wander its paths in silence, watching the trees sway, hoping to feel just a little less far from home. Around us, the hostel buzzed with boys from every corner of the province—different accents, different faces, but the same loneliness. We were all far from home, all searching for purpose in the same broken place.

The hostel mess was its own world, run by Amir Lala—a hot-tempered cook with unpredictable generosity. If he liked you, your plate would overflow. If not, you were left to make do with scraps. His mood determined your dinner.

When we needed supplies or simply a change of air, we explored Hashtnagri Bazaar, a lively market tucked beneath a flyover. Narrow lanes packed with vendors, the scent of spices, roasted corn, and frying samosas filled the air. Just across from us stood the Arbab Niaz Cricket Stadium, a massive oval that brought occasional cheers drifting into our hostel windows. Next door was Government College Peshawar, and just down the street, College Chowk—a chaotic hub of food carts and makeshift stalls, where the street food tasted like heaven, especially when we were broke and hungry.

It wasn't ideal. It wasn't perfect. But this was where life had brought me—and slowly, painfully, it was beginning to shape me.

Section C. That was where I was placed in college—an average group, filled with students no one really expected anything extraordinary from. It stung a little, but I accepted it. Deep inside, though, I wanted more. I had come a long way from home and I didn't want to settle for mediocrity. I wanted to rise. I wanted to prove myself, not just to others, but to me. I wanted to go to Section A—the section of toppers, of ambition, of brilliance.

And so, I started working harder than ever before.

The environment at the hostel was new, and my roommates were all from Parachinar, the very city I had just left behind. Farhad, Iftikhar, and later Shahid. Somehow, fate had wrapped me back in familiarity. Out of them all, Farhad stood out. He was extremely hardworking, always up late at night with his books, his lamp casting shadows over his determined face. Watching him study lit a fire inside me. I wanted to compete with him, and though I still studied less than he did,

I was sharp-minded and gradually began staying up later, pushing myself further. My nights and days became more productive as I fought against my own limitations.

But even with all this effort, something heavier loomed over me— **homesickness** . It was like a cloud that never left my head. I missed my family so much it hurt. My sisters, my father, my mother, my brother—every memory of home stung like salt on a wound. I started dreaming badly. Nightmares plagued me, sometimes showing terrible things happening to my loved ones. I'd wake up in cold sweats, my chest heavy with anxiety. I had no mobile phone to call them. There were only public call offices—PCOs—that charged for every minute. And I was too poor to afford even a call most days.

So I made a decision. I stopped eating lunch. I saved that money, every rupee, and spent it on phone calls to my family. I'd go to the nearby PCO and dial home. Even hearing their voices for just a few minutes felt like breathing again. At the same time, to fight off the crushing homesickness, I started exploring Peshawar—Hayatabad, Sadar, Qissa Khwani Bazaar. The streets, the markets, the strangers—they began stitching confidence into me, one outing at a time.

College was no different in terms of diversity. There were boys speaking Hindko, Urdu, Punjabi. Afghan boys too, some of whom spoke fluent English. One of them, Rashid, even ran an English language institute for refugees. It was inspiring. This city was alive, and I began to feel its pulse.

Still, a sense of **inferiority** gnawed at me. Even my roommates had mobile phones. I didn't. It was my dream to own one—not for luxury, but for a simple call home whenever I needed. This feeling of being left behind drove me even harder to prove my worth.

Then came the **first assessment exams** —the moment I had been preparing for with all my heart. I had studied extra books, poured my energy into understanding every subject, and stayed up long nights. I felt ready. And when the results were announced, everything changed.

It was a morning I'll never forget.

The sun had just risen as the students gathered for the assembly. Mr. Ilyas Faruqi, our principal, stood at the podium —his henna-dyed beard a burning shade of orange, his movements sharp, his speech lightning-fast. He was an energetic man, always in motion, always commanding respect.

And then, he called out my name.

I froze.

I, a thin, almost invisible boy from Section C, had topped the entire college in the first assessment exams—second only to a boy named Adnan from Mardan. But from Section C, I was the first ever to achieve this. My name echoed through the assembly ground. Heads turned. Eyes locked on me. I felt the weight of recognition fall upon my shoulders, and it didn't feel heavy—it felt like wings.

Mr. Faruqi approached me later that day, looked at me with those curious, proud eyes, and congratulated me. It was the first time he had spoken to me. I had always admired him from afar, and now, suddenly, I was in his spotlight. He told me that he had been waiting for a boy like me, someone who could carry the name of the college forward. I felt my chest swell. That was the day everything changed.

After college, I ran to the PCO. I called home and told my family that I had topped the whole classroom—no, not just the classroom, the entire section system. My parents were overjoyed. Their voices lit up with pride, and that pride melted my heart.

That evening, I returned to my room, cleaned up my desk, arranged my books in a perfect order, and sat down with a sense of purpose like never before. I was no longer just trying —I was *becoming* .

Shortly after, I was transferred to Section A.

A new classroom. New faces. New energy.

That's where I met **Ijlal Haider** . He spoke Hindko and belonged to the Shia community—the same as mine. He already knew about Parachinar and the hardships of its people. That connection made our bond stronger from the beginning. He became my first close friend in the new section.

Then came **Kamran** —the joker of the class. Always funny, always light-hearted, and someone who made the days easier with his jokes. And then there was **Murad** —a wise and sincere friend who brought a quiet kind of strength into my life. The three of them became my core circle. I started visiting their homes, getting to know their families, and my world began expanding beyond the walls of the classroom.

That victory in the first assessment didn't just change my academic path. It changed my entire **identity** . I was no longer just a boy from Parachinar. I was someone with potential, with friends, with respect—and above all, with *hope*

.

This was the real beginning of my journey.

Chapter 19: Wings of Hope

For the first time in my life, the weight of inferiority had lifted from my shoulders. I was still poor—still struggling to meet hostel fees, still skipping meals to save money—but something inside me had shifted. I no longer felt small. I no longer looked at the world from beneath the shadow of self-doubt. I had proven to myself that I was capable of greatness, and that belief became my armor.

Mr. Ilyas Faruqi's words echoed in my heart like a divine prophecy: *"You shall top the entire province."* His confidence in me was not just a compliment—it was a firestarter. It lit a torch within me, and with it, I plunged into my books with renewed passion. I entered another spiritual phase too, one I hadn't known since childhood. I began waking for *Tahajjud* , the silent midnight prayer. In the quiet hours, while others slept under the dim hostel lights, I knelt on the cold floor, whispering dreams and fears to the heavens. My prayers became conversations, my solitude a sanctuary.

And then—there was her.

She was like an apparition in my thoughts, ethereal and untouchable. A girl so graceful she seemed born of poetry, her presence lingered in my mind like the final note of a haunting melody. I won't reveal her real name here—she deserves her privacy, her mystery. I'll call her *Lilly* . I won't even say where we met. What matters is that she became the spark in my darkness, the muse to my struggle.

Back when I was drowning in insecurity, I used to push her from my thoughts, convinced that someone like me could never deserve someone like her. But now—now I dared to hope. I remembered her voice, husky yet musical, the kind of voice that could calm storms. I remembered her number too—every digit carved in memory, untouched even after eighteen long years.

Somewhere inside me, a teenage dream began to grow wild and bright: *Maybe if I topped the board exams… just maybe, she'd see me. Consider me. Choose me.*

Love, even in its most silent form, can be a powerful motivator.

But life was still hard. My family back in Parachinar was struggling to pay my hostel and college fees. Every rupee came with sacrifice. I couldn't earn, couldn't support them yet, but I could honor their pain by cutting every possible cost. I stopped spending on transport. On weekends, instead of taking a bus, I wandered through the streets of Peshawar on foot. I came to know the city's pulse—the winding alleys, the smell of roasted corn, the dusty faces of strangers, the rhythm of its markets. In every step, I was not just saving money—I was discovering resilience.

Peshawar gave me more than a city. It gave me families.

Ijlal Haider, my classmate and dear friend, had lost his father, but his mother had raised her sons with strength and dignity. They took me in like one of their own. His brothers treated me like a sibling, and his mother, with her warm smile and quiet kindness, felt like a second mother. I had found a home within their home.

Then there was Murad. His family, too, embraced me. They had high hopes for Murad, and he worked hard to live up to them. I visited their house often, drawn in by the delicious food and the comfort of being around people who cared. His parents, brothers, even cousins—all treated me with affection and respect. I helped them with their studies, and in return, I received something more precious than meals—belonging.

The college didn't have a library. But my hunger for knowledge didn't care. I read whatever I could get my hands on. Often, I'd pick books left behind by seniors in the hostel—dusty, dog-eared, filled with underlined lines and scribbled notes. They were my treasure, my window to worlds beyond mine.

As the midterm exams approached, my days and nights blurred into study marathons. I had one goal—to meet the expectations of Mr. Faruqi. And when fatigue crept in, I'd close my eyes and think of Lilly—her smile, her voice, her imagined laughter. It was enough to keep me going.

When the exams finally arrived, I had a strategy. I'd prepare hard but sleep well the night before each paper. Outside the exam halls, other boys were panicking, their faces pale, books trembling in their hands. I couldn't bear to look at their

anxious expressions—it drained my calm. So I timed my arrival perfectly. I'd enter the hall just as the doors opened, walking past the chaos like it didn't belong to me.

Inside, I was calm. Focused. I wrote with clarity. I gave the best of myself.

And then, it was over. Two weeks of exams had ended. A short vacation followed.

I packed my bags—every book, every note—and with Farhad and Iftikhar, headed to Kohat Adda. The buses to Parachinar lined up like waiting horses. My heart raced. I was going home.

As the bus rolled through the landscape, we passed through a city that I knew all too well—the city where Lilly lived. The air changed as we entered it. It felt scented, magical, like the very wind carried her essence. I looked out the window, imagining her walking down one of those lanes, her laughter echoing off the walls. I spotted an area where I thought—just thought—her house might be. My heart ached to fly, to go there, to see her from a distance. But I sat quietly, holding my longing like a secret.

Soon after, nausea struck. I had always been terrible at traveling. I popped the infamous orange-colored pills and leaned onto Iftikhar's shoulder, trying to sleep.

Five hours later, the air shifted again. This time, it was cooler—crisp and clean. The kind of air that can only belong to one place.

Parachinar.

I opened my eyes and gazed out. The rolling green hills, the familiar streets, the silent strength of home—it all rushed into me like music. I was no longer a visitor. I was returning as someone new, someone changed.

Home welcomed me with open arms. My favorite sister, Basmeen, hugged me tight, her eyes glowing with pride. I had lunch in the warmth of our old kitchen, surrounded by familiar voices. Then I lay down in my bed, breathing in the cold, pure air of Parachinar.

The world felt right again.

And somewhere far away, a dream named Lilly still danced in my heart—no longer impossible, no longer forbidden.

Just waiting.

Chapter 20: The Return to Parachinar

Parachinar felt different this time. It wasn't just a city anymore—it had become a companion, a muse, a quiet lover

whispering hope into my ears. The roads were the same, the buildings hadn't changed, and the poverty still clung to us like old dust—but something inside me had shifted. My dreams had grown larger, and so had my heart.

Our house, with its leaking roof and fading paint, looked like it had been waiting for me. My father's old car sat faithfully in the courtyard, silent and tired, yet somehow proud. We still had little, but I had brought home something invisible yet powerful—ambition. And that alone made everything glow.

The first breath of Punjabi Bazaar wrapped around me like an old friend. The scent of samosas and kebabs from Khaar Bazaar brought back a rush of childhood hunger and laughter. Noor Market, with its narrow lanes and tall buildings, looked like pages from an antique book. The shrine of Agha-e-Irani stood serene, the smoke of incense curling through the air like prayers made visible.

Thursdays in Parachinar were something magical—pilgrims at the shrines, children in bright clothes, laughter blending with the call of the muezzin. I thought to myself, if the world knew about this place, they'd come here just to feel what I felt now.

Cantt Road was my favorite—an avenue of peace beneath arching maple trees whose rust-colored leaves carpeted the ground like forgotten poetry. The shrine of Syed Abbas stood silently by the roadside, a place where weary minds found rest.

At Maan Singh Gate, I paused. Its ancient wooden doors and iron grills told stories no book could capture. I imagined warriors and traders passing through centuries ago, unaware that one day a boy with big dreams would find comfort in the same view.

I wandered to Sra Gala, the old neighborhood of my childhood. Kako and Agara had long returned to the earth, but their home still breathed the scent of time, of earth and firewood, of home. Shublan had lost none of its spirit—the laughter of its people still echoed through its alleys.

Imamia Colony was alive with sport as always—boys playing football in dusty fields, their shouts carrying a rhythm I had long missed. But something was gone—the Afghan refugees, once a vibrant part of our community, had moved on. Their absence left the air thinner, less colorful. The diversity was missing, like a song without its harmony.

Yet I wasn't here just to reminisce. My mind buzzed with visions of the future. I saw business potential in every street. Parachinar was untouched, full of opportunity. I dreamed of modern interiors, customer service, branding—ideas borrowed from Peshawar that could revolutionize this place. In small towns, trust and connection mattered more than billboards.

But dreams need money, and I had none. For now, my only capital was ambition—and the board exams. So I folded my dreams like paper planes and put them aside, promising I'd return to them when the time was right.

At home, pride blossomed in quieter corners too. Basmeen was excelling at college, her name now a synonym for success in the family. Little Naila, barely in seventh grade, showed signs of brilliance that left me stunned. Her questions were sharp, her thoughts even sharper. I told my father that we must never compromise on their education—not even for food. My parents, bless them, were already a step ahead. Their hearts beat only for our futures.

But as the vacation wore on, I realized I hadn't touched a single book from the heavy pile I had dragged all the way from Peshawar. They sat unopened, like scolded companions, reminding me of the time I had squandered. I regretted bringing them.

When it was time to leave, Basmeen, ever the helper, repacked my mountain of things. Before dawn broke, I stood at the bus terminal at Eid Gah Market, half-asleep, shivering in the morning chill. I always wondered why Parachinaris began their journeys before the sun rose. Why not wait for light? But some things aren't meant to be questioned—they're just the way they are.

I popped the usual little orange pills to stop the nausea that always came with travel and boarded the bus. We stopped in Doaba after three hours for lunch at a greasy roadside hotel, the kind where dust and spices shared the same air.

As we resumed our journey, my heart started to flutter—Lilly's city was near. I closed my eyes and imagined her—her voice, soft and husky, still echoing in the chambers of my mind. I dreamed, foolishly but sincerely, of a future where she might be mine. Her city felt like a garden of fragrance, and even the wind seemed to carry her name.

But the fantasy faded fast as the dust of Peshawar swallowed us. The smog, the horns, the grayness—it was all there waiting. I returned to the hostel, now quiet and ghostlike, the walls whispering stories of students past and dreams half-fulfilled.

The midterm results were only three days away, and the air was heavy with tension. Everyone walked slower, spoke softer, and stared longer at the notice board as if willing it to

speak. I lay on my creaky bed, tired but restless, the thought of Lilly and my future dancing in my head like fireflies in a jar.

Tomorrow, life would resume—and I had promises to keep.

Chapter 21: The Crown of Expectations

The air in college had changed. It was no longer filled with just the rustle of books or the whisper of chalk on the board—it pulsed with nervous energy. All of us high achievers, the so-called serious lot, were waiting with pounding hearts. The midterm results were coming.

The morning of the result day felt heavier than usual. Everything looked a little blurred to me—my vision clouded by anxiety. I woke up early, took a bath hoping to shake off the nerves, and made my way to college, my steps slow, my chest tight.

As I passed by the principal's office, Mr. Ilyas Faruqi emerged. He looked at me—sharp, long, and strange—as if he were trying to read my soul. His eyes weren't kind, but they weren't unkind either. He had a way of carrying expectations like swords. His affection came in odd shapes: sometimes as

criticism, sometimes as silence. Making him smile was like trying to crack a stone with whispers. But I could feel something in his gaze today—it was loaded.

The morning assembly passed like a blur. Routine words, familiar prayers, and then we were sent back to our classes. Moments later, the silence of the corridor was broken by a sudden wave of murmurs. The results had been pinned outside the admin office. A tide of footsteps rushed there.

But I stayed back. I didn't have the courage. I remained glued to my seat, staring blankly ahead, too afraid of what I might—or might not—see. And then, the classroom door burst open.

It was Ijlal.

He rushed in, wrapped me in a hug, and whispered with a beaming smile, "You did it… you're the topper!"

Everything paused for a moment. Time, air, fear—it all froze.

I stepped out, surrounded by curious eyes. There it was: my name at the very top of the list, shining like a crown. And the gap—oh, the glorious gap—between my score and the second-highest was wide, bold, and impossible to ignore.

A fire ignited inside me. Not of arrogance, but of confidence. A pure, burning pride.

Mr. Ilyas Faruqi summoned me to his office. This time, he didn't scold or frown. He opened his arms and hugged me—tight, warm, silent. And then, he handed me a cup of tea. I

sipped it slowly, with a strange sense of honor, as if I'd finally earned his unspoken approval.

That day, I was also introduced to the Managing Director—Haji Aslam. A tall, majestic figure with a long beard and eyes that smiled before his lips did. He hailed from Thall, not far from Parachinar. He had a peculiar habit of giving small, affectionate slaps to students he admired. I received one—and I loved it. That soft slap felt like a medal.

From that moment, the entire college seemed to look at me differently. Seniors nodded in recognition, teachers paused mid-sentence when I entered. I wasn't invisible anymore.

Later that day, I walked to the PCO and called home. My voice trembled as I shared the news. I could hear the joy in my parents' silence. After the call, I walked. I needed air.

As I moved through the streets, I saw the struggle painted on the faces of the poor—men bending their backs to the earth, women dragging burdens twice their size, eyes that had forgotten how to dream. When I reached Saddar, I saw the contrast—rich faces, relaxed steps, skin unmarked by the sun, dressed in privilege.

And something hit me.

Why did the poor, with their striking cheekbones and natural grace, still appear so worn—while the rich, regardless of features, seemed radiant?

That day, I made a vow: I would fight poverty with everything I had. I would never let it define me again. Poverty was not

just a lack of money—it was a wound on dignity, a constant thief of dreams.

Back at the hostel, I began receiving subtle protocol. Respect appeared in gestures, in words, in how people paused when I passed. But I knew the real war hadn’t even begun.

A month slipped by and the shadow of the final board exam grew larger. Mr. Ilyas Faruqi began drilling motivation into us. The teachers wrapped up the courses and began the cycle of revisions. I was ready, but beneath my calm surface, a storm brewed.

What if I failed to top the board?

The weight of expectations pressed down like a mountain. I began preparing in ways others didn’t. I practiced writing my papers not just with knowledge but with style—neat, legible, clear. I added extra content at the end of my answers, to signal that I knew more than what the textbooks offered. I trained my mind in silence—meditation, focus, control. Doubt was the enemy now.

And then, the day came.

Final exams.

I arrived just in time—deliberately—so I wouldn’t see the panic on my classmates' faces. I had slept a solid eight hours, drank a strong, black tea, and felt alert. The paper was handed to me.

But I didn't read it.

I closed my eyes and told myself, *You are ready. You've read more than anyone else. There's no one like you here. You've earned this moment.*

Then I opened my eyes and began. One word after another. One paper after another. I gave them everything I had.

At last, the final exam was over.

The next morning, we packed for Parachinar again. We reached Kohat Adda, climbed onto the bus, and began the journey. But this time, even as we passed Lilly's city, my heart was too heavy for butterflies.

Parachinar wasn't the same either. It didn't sing to me like last time. The charm had faded because the storm was still ahead. I had appeared in the final board exam—and now, my competitors weren't just from my college, but from all across the province.

Self-doubt crept into my thoughts like shadows at sunset.

I pretended confidence at home, laughing and smiling, but inside, I was fighting. I didn't leave the house much. I wasn't in the mood for shrines or bazaars or football in the colony.

The vacation stretched for two long months. Every day felt like a question.

And then, at last, it began to end. The countdown to results

began. My heartbeat raced. The closer we came to the result, the heavier the air became.

Parachinar had no color now. Only waiting. Only hope. Only fear.

And so, I waited—with clenched fists, sleepless nights, and a silent prayer sealed behind my lips.

Chapter 22: The Tears of Triumph

One afternoon in Parachinar, our landline phone rang with its sharp, metallic chime—a sound that always stirred a small storm in our quiet home. My heart jumped as I picked up. On the other end was a voice I knew too well.

It was Mr. Ilyas Faruqi.

His words were brief, as always. “Qamar, come to Peshawar. Tomorrow.” No explanation. No details. Just that firm, commanding voice.

As I hung up, my heart was racing. His tone was unreadable, but the call itself was strange—out of the blue and urgent. I

tried to calm myself, torn between fear and hope. *Why would he call me back unless… unless something big had happened?*

I barely slept that night. My mind was spinning with possibilities. I packed my bag under the dim yellow light of our room, my hands trembling slightly. Just before dawn, I left for the Eid Gah Market terminal. The sky was still dark. The wind carried that familiar early morning chill of Parachinar, brushing against my cheeks like a secret being whispered.

I took the usual orange pills for nausea before the long ride began. As the bus pulled away from the hills of my hometown, my heart thudded against my ribs with every turn. This time, the city of Lilly shimmered in the distance like a silent promise—my soul hopeful, despite the uncertainty.

By afternoon, I was back in the furnace of Peshawar—the suffocating heat and dust curling around me. I headed straight for the hostel. Mr. Zia-ur-Rehman, the kind-hearted warden, was there. I told him Mr. Ilyas had summoned me.

He smiled knowingly. “Expect good news. The result comes tomorrow.”

A flicker of hope lit inside me. I called Mr. Ilyas that evening from the hostel’s old telephone. He simply said, “Good. Be ready.”

That night, he arrived in his Silver Toyota Townace, and I got in without saying much. As we drove through the city, he finally broke the silence.

“You haven’t performed according to my expectations,” he said, looking ahead, his voice flat.

His words hit me like ice water. My stomach dropped. *Why would he bring me all the way here… just to tell me that?*

I nodded, stayed silent, hiding the sting behind my calm face.

We reached Nishtarabad and stopped in front of a dimly lit old office with a fading board: *Aaj News.* The air smelled of ink and old files. He told me to wait. I sat alone on a metal chair outside the glass door, my mind spiraling with doubts.

Then he came out.

In his hand was a paper—faint, warm from the printer.

He handed it to me and smiled.

“Congratulations, Qamar. You did it,” he said. “You haven’t just hit sixes. You’ve hit eighters.”

I looked down. My photo stared back at me. *Qamar Abbas has topped the board examination,* the bold headline read.

It felt like the world froze.

Tears rushed out of my eyes before I could stop them. My body shook. I had always thought people crying from happiness was something out of movies. Fiction. A lie.

But it was real. I was crying—deep, uncontrollable tears that blurred the paper in my hands.

Mr. Ilyas pulled me into a hug. His white shirt soaked my tears. I held on to him like a child.

Inside the news office, the staff surrounded me with congratulations, handshakes, and warm smiles. I was no longer a student—they looked at me like a symbol.

He drove me back to the hostel and made me promise to keep the news to myself until the morning.

But secrets don't last long under starlit skies. Mr. Zia saw my face and asked gently. I couldn't hold it in. "I topped the board," I said.

He hugged me and laughed like a proud uncle, then took me to a restaurant on his motorcycle, zipping through the sleepy streets of Peshawar. There, over a simple dinner, he gave me his phone. "Call home," he said.

It was past midnight. I hesitated, but dialed.

My brother Aamir answered, his voice groggy. "Aamir," I said. "I topped the board."

There was a silence. Then an eruption.

He woke the whole house. One by one, I spoke to everyone—my siblings, my parents. The air on the other end of the call turned into a festival. That night, they didn't sleep. Neither

did I.

Morning came. I had barely dozed off when Ijlal burst into the hostel, newspaper in hand. He was glowing with joy. We embraced tightly. Word had spread like wildfire.

We went to college together, where I was met with cheers and pats on the back. The college accountant, Dileep Kumar—a short, dark-skinned man with a kind heart—shook my hand firmly and called me “Qamar-e-Aalam.”

Murad arrived soon after, and others followed. That entire day was filled with laughter, hugs, and celebration.

But my mind was already flying back home.

The classes were still weeks away. I couldn’t stay. I packed again and boarded a bus for Parachinar.

As we passed through Lilly’s city, I stared long at the neighborhood I believed she lived in. Her face danced in my thoughts. I felt something different this time—not longing, not pain—but a strange sense of worth. *I deserved her now. I had proved myself.*

Back in Parachinar, my home exploded with joy. My family smothered me with kisses. My mother wept as she clutched me. I wasn’t just their son anymore—I was their pride, their shining hope.

That summer, Parachinar felt like heaven. I walked through the bazaar like it belonged to me. I sat longer at Agha-e-Irani’s

tomb. My walks through the streets were filled with imagination. I held dreams like lanterns, lighting up the corners of my mind.

One day, Aamir gifted me a mobile phone—an old Motorola. It was the first in our family. I don't know how he got it, but he handed it to me with a smile I'll never forget. That tiny device felt like a treasure.

But vacation passed like a blink. Time, now, was a horse galloping faster than ever. The day came when I had to return.

Once again, I packed my bag. Once again, I said goodbye. Once again, I boarded that bus and watched the green hills of Parachinar disappear.

Back at the Peshawar hostel, a new chapter was waiting. Twelfth grade classes were about to begin. And this time, I wasn't just another student—I was the board topper.

And now, the real challenge began.

It wasn't just about becoming great. It was about *staying* great.

Chapter 23: The Weight of a Crown

My second-year classes began under a new sky. Everything had changed—but not everything was easier.

Now I was known.

Teachers greeted me with warmth in their eyes, their words often echoing with admiration. My name had weight in the corridors. Boys in the hostel would stand when I passed, smile when I spoke, and often ask for my notes, my advice, or simply a few minutes of my time. I was no longer invisible. I was a symbol.

And yet—recognition brought pressure. Fame has its own gravity.

In my pocket was a mobile phone of my own, a modest Motorola gifted by Aamir. Sometimes, under the cover of night, when the hostel lights dimmed and the air stilled, I would silently press the digits of *her* number—Lilly's number—etched in my memory like poetry. I never called. But the presence of her number on my keypad felt like a silent link between two worlds: my burning reality, and the dream that kept me breathing.

But beneath it all, a storm brewed inside me—the unrelenting pressure to stay on top. It gnawed at my sleep, my appetite, my peace. To win once is glory. To stay a winner is war.

I moved out of the suffocating top-floor room where summers felt like hell and winters like exile. This time, I was offered

one of the best rooms in the hostel. Suddenly, everyone wanted to be my roommate. I wasn't just a student anymore—I had become a magnet.

New faces moved in. Among them was Kamran Khan.

Kamran was a strange paradox—an odd blend of contradictions. He was funny, yet ambitious. Average in his studies but sky-high in his dreams. From a poor background, yet carried himself with the air of someone from an elite family. Physically weak, yet mentally bold. His courage often outpaced his reality, and I found myself learning things from him—how to carry yourself when you have nothing, how to dream without apology, how to act rich even when you're broke.

Kamran made life lighter, even under the crushing pressure of expectation.

That entire year, I had only two true companions: my books, and Lilly in my thoughts. Each night, after exhausting study sessions, her face would drift into my mind like a lullaby. I would fall asleep thinking of her, and wake up with her memory somewhere still warm inside me.

In the middle of this whirlwind, Mr. Ilyas Faruqi came with surprising news: my name had been selected for inclusion in the book *Who's Who in Pakistan* . I was to receive an award in Karachi.

The idea felt surreal— *Karachi* . A city so far and foreign, a place I'd only heard about in stories and seen in blurry TV clips.

I scraped together what little money I had, filled out the forms, and arranged the trip with my closest companion—Murad Ali.

We boarded the bus for what turned into a grueling 24-hour journey. Karachi welcomed us with dust and decay. It was nothing like I had imagined. The air was heavy with pollution, the streets overcrowded and chaotic. Our stay was a disaster from the beginning. We had no proper hotel. We first crashed at Murad's cousin's small, crumbling house for two nights, then moved to the home of Mr. Ilyas's brother.

That place... it felt like a warehouse more than a home. I slept under the open sky, beside walls blackened with humidity. Mosquitoes whined in my ears all night. It was the worst living condition I had ever faced. There, in the city of lights, I saw shadows instead.

The day before the award ceremony, I visited the office of the award-giving institution, holding my hopes like fragile glass.

And that's when the truth shattered me.

They demanded **Rs. 25,000** for the award. Not as a fee—but as a price. It wasn't an honor. It was a transaction. A private organization selling awards, selling recognition like it was merchandise.

I was devastated.

My college refused to help. No funds. No support. No care. Despite all the name I had earned for them, they turned their faces. I didn't protest. I didn't even fully understand the

betrayal back then.

But now I do.

Still, God had His own plans. The organization had already printed the book. My name was there, permanently etched in ink. They later sent the book and a trophy by courier. I received them quietly, without a ceremony, without applause. I placed them on my shelf and stared at them one night. They meant something—if not to the world, then at least to me.

And then, I buried my disappointment and returned to what I knew best—my books.

I threw myself into study again, fueled by pain, ambition, and something deeper—a fire that no one else could see. I topped every exam. Every single one.

When the final board results came, once again, my name was printed across newspapers like a stamp of glory. I had done it *again.*

My family rejoiced like before—tears, hugs, fireworks of love. But for me, the celebration was quieter. I had learned by now: every peak has a price.

And now, a new mountain waited to be climbed.

I had set my eyes on Chartered Accountancy.

Lahore was the next step. But it came with a weight I couldn't carry— **money.** My family had nothing to support me. The

burden of dreams was mine alone to bear.

Still, Murad and I set out for Lahore to explore our future. The city did not charm me. Like Karachi, it felt too large, too harsh, too soulless. I preferred the quiet heart of Parachinar, even the dust of Peshawar. Lahore felt like it would swallow me whole.

We got a rickshaw and headed to PAC—the legendary institute for CA. But when we arrived, it was underwhelming. A plain building that looked more like a coaching center than the temple of commerce we had imagined. No marble floors, no chandeliers—just tiled classrooms and faded noticeboards.

But I had already made up my mind. I wanted to become a Chartered Accountant. I had heard all the stories: Chartered Accountants were the highest earners, the kings of the financial world.

CA meant getting dirty rich.

I looked at that building and told myself, **accept it** . Accept the ordinary, because your journey will make it extraordinary.

It wasn't love at first sight.

But it was fate.

Chapter 24: A Stranger’s Kindness

I returned to Parachinar with a heavy heart and a heavier dream.

The plan was clear: I had to convince my family to support my journey to Lahore for Chartered Accountancy. But beneath that determination lay a truth I couldn’t ignore—I knew they couldn’t afford it. Not even close.

I sat with my parents and sisters that evening and shared my ambition, laying out the expenses like cards on a table. Their faces fell silent. My father's forehead creased into quiet worry. My mother’s eyes welled up, though she tried to hide it behind her dupatta. My sisters sat still, their hope flickering like a candle caught in wind. No one said it out loud, but we all knew the answer: *we didn't have the money*.

That night, the air in our home was thick with helplessness. I barely slept. My dream of Lahore, of becoming a CA, of breaking the chains of poverty, all of it seemed to be slipping through my fingers like dust.

But then—like the sudden call of dawn after a long, starless night— *a miracle* arrived.

The very next day, my brother Aamir came home, his eyes lit with an excitement I hadn’t seen in weeks. He told us that a friend had spoken of a man named **Mr. Mehmood Ul Haq Alvi** —a wealthy philanthropist, known for sponsoring

students who couldn't afford higher education. His younger brother, Aamir said, was already studying at Ali Trust College in Islamabad, a project under Mr. Alvi's care.

And somehow, incredibly, Aamir had managed to get his phone number.

I stared at the slip of paper in disbelief. My palms were sweaty. My heart thudded like a hammer against my ribs. I was never good at speaking to powerful people. I always felt too small, too unsure, too undeserving. But this was a call I *had* to make.

That evening, I stood near the window, mobile phone trembling in my hand, and dialed the number.

The ring buzzed once. Twice.

Then, a firm, commanding voice answered: " *Hello?* "

My throat tightened. But I pushed through.

"Sir, my name is… I'm a student… I topped my board exams twice…" The words came out rushed, nervous, stumbling over one another like frightened children. But I told him everything—my academic achievements, my dream of becoming a Chartered Accountant, and the reality of my family's financial state.

There was a pause. A long one.

Then, he spoke—calmly, kindly.

“ *Don’t worry. I will support you. Come meet me in Islamabad.* ”

I froze.

It took me a moment to process what I’d just heard. But when I did, a wave of joy surged through me so powerful that it brought tears to my eyes.

I ran into the house with the news, and suddenly our little home erupted like it was Eid. My father smiled in a way I hadn’t seen in months. My mother wept—not from sorrow, but from gratitude. My sisters clapped, and for the first time in a long while, the walls of our home echoed with laughter instead of silence.

That night, I walked the quiet roads of Parachinar like a boy floating in a dream. The stars were brighter. The breeze softer. I visited the tomb of Agha-e-Irani, bowed my head, and whispered prayers of thanks. I couldn’t sleep. I didn’t want to. I just lay in bed with a smile that wouldn’t fade.

The next day, my father and I began our journey.

We reached Peshawar by night and stayed there in the modest comfort of an old friend’s home. In the early morning, we boarded the next bus to Islamabad. It was a long, quiet ride, but something inside me felt lighter than ever before.

When we arrived, I was stunned by the city's grace. **Islamabad** was unlike any city I had seen. Clean. Calm. Green. The trees seemed to hum with peace. It wasn’t like the chaos of Karachi or the grime of Lahore. It felt like a place

where dreams could find roots.

We reached Mr. Alvi's office—a farmhouse tucked among the nurseries of H-8 Sector. It was elegant but simple, surrounded by flowers and silence. A small kingdom of kindness.

Mr. Mehmood Ul Haq Alvi greeted us—a man of dark skin, white hair, and a powerful presence. His voice was deep and carried authority, yet beneath it was warmth. He listened. He didn't interrupt. He believed.

After hearing us out, he smiled and said, "You will stay at my guest house in Lahore, the one I keep for family and visitors. Your tuition fee—I will take care of it."

I couldn't speak.

This man, a stranger a week ago, was now my savior.

We left his office walking a little taller. My father held my hand like he used to when I was small. I had never seen him so proud. For once, the future did not look like a wall—it looked like a door, slowly opening.

We returned to Parachinar and the preparations began. My departure was near.

But something else had happened too—something I hadn't expected.

My sisters had seen me rise from nothing, and now, they saw me heading toward something grand. *Hope* bloomed in their

hearts. **Basmeen** , especially, took it as a challenge. She sharpened her focus, studied harder, and soon became the **topper** of her college. **Naila** , the youngest, already a bright spark, now burned with ambition. Even the others began to sit longer with books, ask more questions, care more deeply.

In the evenings, I shared what I had learned—study hacks, exam techniques, tricks of memorization. I wanted them to feel what I had felt: that success was not for the chosen few—it was for the ones who fought for it.

Finally, the day came.

I packed my bags. Folded my clothes. Pressed my white shalwar kameez. Tucked away a few books and my mother's silent prayers. I stepped outside and breathed in the *clean, cold air* of Parachinar one last time.

Then I turned my face toward **Lahore** .

A city I didn't love. A city that didn't love me. But a city where destiny was waiting.

And I was ready.

Chapter 25: Exile Within a City

When I first stepped into **Lahore** , all I had was a worn-out backpack, trembling hope—and a single contact number.

It belonged to **Mr. Akram** , the caretaker of the annexe where I was to stay—a man who would soon define my days in strange and often difficult ways. He was a large, dark-skinned man with a heavy walk and a heavier gaze. He was the chef, the manager, the cleaner, the host. In short, he was everything in that house. He did it all, and he let you know it.

The **annexe** , nestled in a posh neighborhood of Lahore, was a small but elegant three-room building meant for Mr. Alvi's friends and family. I was given a beautiful room on the upper floor. From its window, I could see the tree-lined streets of Lahore swaying gently under the amber sun. Below, the ground floor held a large hall, a guest room, and a dining room that smelled of spices and polish.

After some rest, Mr. Akram summoned me. He told me I had to pay a visit to **Mr. Alvi's daughter** . She welcomed me with kindness, her tone warm but formal. Her young son, **Izzat** , soon became my friend—an intelligent boy with a curious mind and a certain Lahore-born charm. His father, I later learned, was a respected cardiologist in the city.

And so, life began in this new city. Days filled with books and lectures. Mornings rushing through Lahore traffic to reach the institute. Evenings marked by lonely meals and longer thoughts.

But peace never lasted too long in our story.

Suddenly, word came from home— **Parachinar was burning again** .

The sectarian flames had flared once more. This time it was different. This time, it was **a war** . Sunnis were driven out in a sweeping exodus. The only road connecting Parachinar to the rest of Pakistan—a lifeline that passed through Sunni-dominated areas—was sealed shut.

Then came the stories.

Stories that made my blood freeze.

Basmeen's Sunni friend lost her seven-year-old sister. The little girl was shot in the street—right in front of her home. For **two whole days** , the girl's body lay on the pavement while the sister watched from the window, unable to step out due to relentless gunfire. The mother's screams echoed through our memories. And this was just one tale. There were **hundreds more** , each soaked in grief, helplessness, and hatred.

As the blockade continued, food began to run short in Parachinar. My family, already struggling, now had nothing. Even the small pocket money they used to send me dried up.

And amidst all this chaos, I was quietly battling another front **— my heart** .

I still spoke to **Lilly** sometimes. Or tried to. She remained a

distant echo in my life—a name that used to mean something. Her beauty lingered in my memory, but beyond that, there was little connection. She wasn't poetic. She didn't carry the depth I longed for. Her voice lacked softness. But I had nothing else, so I clung to what I could.

One Sunday morning, I gathered every ounce of courage and called her.

"I want to marry you," I said.

Her response cut through me like ice.

"You're like a brother to me," she said, casually, as if unaware that her words had just shattered someone's world.

She added, "I want to marry someone whose name won't require me to change mine."

That meant she already had someone—someone who shared her father's name. It was true. I found out later that her boyfriend's name matched her father's.

That night, **false hope bled quietly inside me** . And for many nights after, I lay in bed staring at the ceiling, letting silence cradle my broken dreams.

In this strange city, **Farhad** , my old friend from Parachinar, was a rare comfort. He had also moved to Lahore and was living in a cramped university hostel with two other roommates. I'd visit when I could. But soon, even that refuge would be strained.

At the annexe, an odd pattern emerged.

Whenever guests came—especially families with women and children—I was **ordered out** .

No warning. No apology.

Just: *Leave.*

And so I would leave. Often for hours. Sometimes all night. Initially, I stayed at Farhad's place. But with the frequency of these evacuations, even his hostel warden grew suspicious and warned him not to host guests anymore.

I had nowhere else to go.

So I started **sleeping in parks** .

In hospitals.

On benches beneath trees. In corridors echoing with patients' cries. Even **during my exams** , I wandered the city like a ghost, clutching my books and trying not to cry in public.

One night, while resting in the courtyard of **Punjab Institute of Cardiology** , I received news that broke me completely.

A bomb blast had ripped through a political rally in Parachinar. Among the dead was **Hashmat** , my cousin, my brother, my dearest friend.

I couldn't breathe.

Tears spilled as I paced up and down **Jail Road** , sobbing beneath the orange glow of streetlamps. My brother Aamir had identified Hashmat's body in the hospital back home. I couldn't be there. I couldn't even grieve properly. I just wept alone, in a city that didn't know me, for a man who had loved me like no other.

Meanwhile, the **dream of becoming a Chartered Accountant** had begun to lose its shine.

At my institute, I met teachers who were already qualified CAs. Their lifestyles didn't match the fantasies I had built. Modest clothes. Cheap cars. Low salaries. They weren't the image of success I had envisioned. Mr. Alvi, with his construction business and sprawling wealth, seemed far more inspiring.

The dream I had fought so hard for began to feel hollow.

To make matters worse, **Mr. Akram's attitude turned bitter** . He began treating me like one of the house staff. Ordering me to wash dishes. Clean the kitchen. Serve guests.

One night, fed up, I snapped.

"I'm not your servant," I said sharply. "I'm here to study. Mr. Alvi is supporting me."

The next day, Mr. Akram reported me to Mr.Alvi's Son.

That evening, he stormed into the annexe, summoned me downstairs, and scolded me with such rage that I feared he would raise his hand. My dignity was crushed. My spirit was weary.

That night, I made a decision.

I had to leave.

I applied to various organizations that supported students. And by the grace of God, **a kind man responded** . He offered to pay my hostel expenses. With that blessing, I finally packed my bags and walked away from the annexe.

After more than a year of borrowed walls and borrowed sleep, I found a place of my own—a small room in a modest hostel. It looked more like a prison cell than a bedroom. Cracked walls. A single fan. A broken window.

But it was mine.

No one could ask me to leave.

No one could order me to wash dishes or disappear.

And in that little cell of solitude, **I found peace** .

I was free.

Chapter 26: The Fractured Homeland

The small cell I now called home in Lahore gave me a taste of something I hadn't felt in a long time: peace. It wasn't luxury—it was barely comfort—but it was mine. No more sudden evictions. No more tiptoeing around guests. The cracked walls may have held no art, no softness, but they embraced me like old arms that asked nothing in return.

But the freedom I tasted in Lahore was a bitter contrast to the nightmare unfolding back home. Parachinar was bleeding again.

The food crisis had escalated into something apocalyptic. Entire families were forced to abandon roads and passports, risking their lives through a jagged, unforgiving route—first crossing into Afghanistan through the Khost border and then entering Pakistan again via Torkham, just to reach Peshawar. It was an expensive journey, yes, but more than that—it was a journey of desperation. A journey that stripped people of dignity and hope.

Our home was drowning in grief. Hashmat's absence had turned everything grey. His laughter no longer echoed in the courtyard. His footsteps—once the rhythm of joy in our family—were now replaced by silence so loud, it pressed against the walls like a storm. My parents, once the pillars of our resilience, had shadows under their eyes deeper than any war.

And yet, amidst this abyss of loss and loneliness, something

unexpected came into my life—a voice. A presence.

Her name was Emaan.

I had met her online, and at first, I hadn't expected anything beyond a passing exchange. But Emaan wasn't just anyone—she was the first woman I had spoken to who made me feel seen and heard not for what I had or how I looked, but for the way I thought.

She was studying English Literature in Lahore, and her conversations were poetry in themselves. Emaan could dissect politics with scalpel precision, wrap her thoughts in metaphor, and still somehow sound like a breeze after a heavy rain. Her voice had warmth and rhythm—like a familiar song from childhood—and her love for literature added depth to every word she uttered.

Talking to her felt like therapy, like the slow stitching of a wounded soul. I found myself waiting for that one daily call, the one moment in my otherwise grey day when something felt right.

Eventually, we met for lunch. She came with a friend, and I remember standing outside the restaurant, nervous but excited. But when I saw her, something inside me dimmed.

She wasn't beautiful—at least not by the world's shallow standards, and maybe not even by mine. Her features didn't match the image my imagination had painted during those long phone calls. That day, I cursed my eyes for looking, for noticing. I wished I had never seen her.

But even then, her voice remained untouched. Still a sanctuary.

Life moved on. My sister Anwar got married to a man named Mumtaz, a kind, soft-spoken gentleman working in the UAE. I couldn't attend the wedding. The roads to Parachinar were still sealed shut, as though our city had been cut away from the rest of the world.

I was homesick. Desperately. So I decided to take the dangerous route—through Afghanistan. The moment I stepped back into Parachinar, it felt like breathing again after months underwater. My mother wept when she saw me, and I—though I tried to remain composed—fell apart silently.

I visited Hashmat's grave in Shublan. I knelt on the cold soil and cried like I hadn't cried in years. That boy—the one who used to tease us, sing loudly from rooftops, hug me so hard I gasped—was now just a memory carved into stone.

Parachinar was not Parachinar anymore. It was a haunted town. Even the shrine of Agha e Irani, once a place of spiritual grace and strength, was now filled with grieving women clutching their rosaries like lifelines. Children prayed with eyes too old for their age.

A few days later, the military organized a convoy for travel to Peshawar. I packed quickly and boarded a van. But when we reached Sadda, chaos erupted.

Gunfire cracked through the air like lightning. I didn't think—I just reacted. I leapt out of the van through a shattered window and ran. I ran like a madman, my feet barely touching the ground. Eight kilometers passed under me before

I stopped. I hadn't heard the gunshots anymore. I hadn't heard my phone ringing either. I was still running.

When I finally answered, it was Aamir.

"I'm coming," he said.

And he did.

But the roads closed again, and I was trapped once more.

Farhad was also in Parachinar, and together we tried to steal a moment of joy from the wreckage. A day before the next convoy, we decided to go on a small drive. We bought fruit and a chicken, and I borrowed our car.

I had barely learned to drive.

Somewhere on Kirman road, a dangerous curve surprised me. The car veered off the edge and crashed down. Metal screamed. The world spun.

By some miracle, we were unhurt—but the car was not.

Aamir arrived first. The expression on his face twisted my heart. That car was not just a vehicle—it was a lifeline in our poverty-stricken life. And I had broken it.

We said nothing to my father. Hid the damage. That night, I lay in bed as Basmeen sat beside me, moving her fingers gently through my hair. She found something—tiny shards of

glass. She looked at me, confused.

“There’s glass in your hair. What happened?”

I smiled, lied, and shrugged it off.

The next morning, as I returned to Lahore, my father had already learned the truth. His disappointment stung more than his words. I promised him I would send money for the repairs. I scraped together what I could with the help of friends and sent it to Aamir, who—bless his soul—handled the rest. Somehow, the car was repaired.

Then came another blow.

Khalid—my mother's brother—was returning home from university. He never made it. He was slaughtered on the road. His body came back in pieces.

That year, it seemed like the graveyards of Parachinar expanded faster than the streets. Hundreds, thousands, buried in the name of sect. Names became numbers. Families, ruins.

In all this darkness, a flicker of hope was Basmeen.

She had set her sights on the CSS—Pakistan’s elite public service exam. I encouraged her, supported her. When I returned to Lahore, I filled and submitted her form myself. She had already gathered the books and materials, already etched her path in her mind. But her heart—wounded by the deaths of Hashmat and Khalid—needed time to heal.

Back in Lahore, I started searching. Not for another room. Not for love. But for something to *do* —some way to grow. Business, freelancing, something, anything.

Emaan was still with me, her voice like calm waves. We were two souls on parallel paths—both shaped by grief, both stitched together by language, both waiting for a dawn that didn't come easily.

And for now, that was enough.

Chapter 27: Sparks in the Battery Room

The year had begun to shed its layers of grief and uncertainty, and in their place, something unfamiliar began to bloom—*possibility* .

It all started with a phone call from Kamran, my friend from Peshawar. He told me he was in Lahore with his cousin, who ran an automotive battery business. The moment I heard the word *business* , my ears perked up like an antenna catching distant signals. My heart, always tuned to the frequency of ambition, skipped a beat.

"Let's meet," I said.

That weekend, I made my way to Firdos Market, one of Lahore's bustling commercial hubs. Kamran led me down a narrow street into a modest three-room house. At first glance, it looked like any ordinary residential space. But as we stepped inside, I realized I was walking into a different world.

The first room was a simple living space—clean, compact, purposeful. The other two rooms were filled with stacks of batteries, each labeled with a bold brand name in capital letters: **HANKOOK** .

And there, standing amid the hum of inventory and ambition, was Mr. Awais Javed.

Awais was the kind of man who made you feel like an old friend in the very first meeting. His handshake was firm, his smile genuine, and his words carried both friendliness and confidence. He had none of the stiff formalities of a typical businessman. Instead, he welcomed me with warmth—as though the universe had whispered in his ear that we were meant to know each other.

We clicked instantly.

Over tea and laughter, I asked him everything about the battery trade. And he, to my surprise, answered every question with such clarity and honesty that I found myself not only learning—but admiring.

What began as a curiosity soon turned into a deep fascination. The battery business—something I had never considered—was a sleeping giant. Even small retailers were making millions, all thanks to Pakistan's relentless energy crisis. Batteries had

become more than auto parts—they were *household lifelines* .

Every weekend, Awais would call me, and we'd meet over grilled fish or biryani at our favorite roadside joints. With every conversation, my understanding of the industry deepened—and so did our friendship.

I saw an opportunity—not just to observe but to contribute. I offered Awais my help in organizing his financial records. Free consultancy, I told him, in exchange for exposure. He agreed without hesitation.

I introduced him to the idea of an ERP system for bookkeeping. Together, we digitized the chaos—transformed handwritten ledgers into clean digital dashboards. For the first time, I could *see* the pulse of the business: the margins, the cash flows, the growth.

And what I saw amazed me.

Even as a less popular imported brand, HANKOOK's maintenance-free (MF) batteries were thriving in a market dominated by cheap, locally produced lead-acid batteries. The demand for MF batteries was growing as consumers sought cleaner, longer-lasting solutions. HANKOOK was riding that wave, and we were at the front of it.

I began accompanying Awais on his rounds to retailers. Each shop was a universe of its own—greasy counters, shouting mechanics, the smell of oil and metal in the air. He'd speak with confidence, take orders, negotiate prices, and walk out smiling. Watching him was like watching an artist at work.

One day, he introduced me to his business partner—Mr. Arif Ali. Arif was gentle, wise, and kind-eyed, a perfect complement to Awais's fiery energy. We became a trio—dreamers, builders, companions.

While all this unfolded in Lahore, my heart still pulsed with love and concern for those back home. Basmeen was preparing for her CSS exam in Peshawar, and I prayed for her like a brother prays for his nation. She wasn't just my sister—she was a storm in a teacup, a tribal girl who dared to dream beyond the confines of geography, gender, and history.

I knew what it meant for a woman from Parachinar to sit for such a prestigious exam. In our part of the world, most girls were still told that ambition was not for them. But Basmeen… she was different. She was the rebellion written in soft handwriting. I couldn't stop being proud.

Meanwhile, my attention turned to Aamir.

He was studying in Parachinar Degree College, and I saw a spark in him—the kind that could light up a path if pointed in the right direction. I wanted to bring him into the world I was exploring. Business wasn't just profit—it was identity, independence, escape. I wanted that for him.

As I went deeper into the automotive parts industry, I discovered a vast world behind those greasy counters—engine oil, filters, spare parts, lubricants. Each of them a niche. Each with million-rupee potential. The margins were attractive. The demand was steady. The market was fragmented and wide open.

I remember sitting in a small café one night, scribbling in my

notebook, doing mental math, sketching business models. The urge to dive in was overwhelming. I didn't just *want* to do it —I *needed* to.

But dreams require fuel. And I had none.

No capital. No investor. Just a mind full of strategy and a heart that refused to settle.

Still, I had something powerful: **clarity** . I knew where I wanted to go. I just had to figure out how to get there.

And so, Chapter 25 ended not with success, but with ignition.

A flame had been lit in a battery room in Firdos Market.

And I wasn't going to let it die.

Chapter 28: The Longest Night

It happened on a night that carved itself into my soul like a scar made of fire.

My phone rang. It was my aunt.

“Qamar! Are you in Lahore?” Her voice trembled with a kind of urgency I had never heard before. “Didn’t anybody tell you about Basmeen?”

My heart stilled. “What about her?” I asked, my voice already unrecognizable, as if it belonged to someone drowning.

There was a silence. And then the words came—slow, sharp, and eternal.

“She died.”

I froze. “No,” I whispered. “No, she was fine. I talked to her. She was studying… she was alive. She’s alive!”

But she wasn’t.

In a panic, I dialed Aamir. He picked up, and I could hear the chaos of grief behind his breath. At first, he tried to lie, to protect me. But the burden broke him. He sobbed like a child and said the words I never wanted to hear again: “She’s gone, bhai… she’s gone.”

Basmeen—my brilliant, brave, beloved sister—was dead.

I left the house like a ghost, got on the first bus to Peshawar. My soul wasn’t in my body anymore; it was already on its knees in front of her grave. The road was a blur. I remember only the pain, the bitter cold of night pressing against the window, and my memories of her—warm, living, full of

laughter.

I remembered her running fingers through my hair the night I was injured in the car crash.

I remembered our long conversations during her CSS preparation—how hopeful she was, how much she wanted to change the world.

And just like that… the world collapsed. A whole universe inside me had died.

Somewhere along that journey, Emaan called. I could barely speak. I cried and told her how I couldn't stop thinking about Basmeen's soft hands, her poetic dreams, her fierce intelligence.

Emaan—graceful, wise, angel-hearted—tried to console me. Her voice was like balm on a bleeding soul.

"Time," she said gently, "time will soften the pain. One day, life will seem normal again."

She spoke in metaphors, in ideas that shimmered like constellations.

"Think of life," she said, "as a code… written by a genius. Nothing is real. We are just characters in a cosmic program."

Her words offered some relief. Temporary. But real.

I reached Peshawar at midnight and spent the night at Murad's home, eyes swollen and heart shattered. The next morning, I caught a seat on a mini airbus to Parachinar. The roads were unsafe—still bleeding from the wounds of war and militancy. Only the sky was left to carry our broken hearts.

When I reached Parachinar, my cousins met me. They didn't have to say anything. Their silence held the weight of mountains.

They took me to Shublan.

But it was too late.

Basmeen had already been buried.

I never saw her one last time.

The last image I had of her was years old—a fading vision of her fingers in my hair. That was all I had left.

I walked to her grave.

And then… I broke.

I screamed into the silence of the mountains, into the graveyard wind, until my throat gave way and my voice cracked like broken glass.

I wished to be buried beside her. The world had no meaning anymore. My home felt like a haunted ruin, a place that had

devoured the ones I loved. Her room—once vibrant with books and laughter—now looked like the last scene of a horror story. A grave wrapped in four walls.

I fled back to Lahore, through the dust of Afghanistan. I looked like a man who had been to war and lost everything. People saw grief etched into my face. They saw the hollow behind my eyes.

And I… I saw death as a friend.

I wanted to end everything. I searched for painless poisons on the internet. I prayed for death in accidents. I wished to disappear like smoke.

But then… I looked at Aamir.

He was worse.

His skin had darkened. His body had shriveled. He looked like an old man trapped in the body of a teenage boy. His eyes were vacant, and his soul… dim.

I couldn't lose him too.

So I called him to Lahore. I took responsibility—not because I was strong, but because I had no choice. I was the eldest. I had to carry the weight no one else could bear.

I got him enrolled in a good college. I taught him a few computer programs. I brought him into the battery business with Awais and Arif. I was also trading commodities with a

small investment—enough to survive, enough to help.

Slowly, I saw light return to his eyes.

He started to take interest. He liked the business. We dreamed again, though this time, our dreams walked with a limp.

We planned to open a shop in Parachinar. It was both a tribute and an escape.

Emaan, meanwhile, vanished into the fog of grief and distance. I don't know when she left my life—or why. Neither of us had the strength to reach out. It was as if the pain had snapped the thread between us.

A year later, I dialed her number. It was permanently off.

That was it. The story of the most graceful and intelligent woman I had known… ended without closure.

Aamir returned to Parachinar after a year. He rented a small shop in the auto market. I arranged the stock—automotive filters with my savings and battery inventory on credit from Awais and Arif.

We started small.

But the business grew. And with it, something else grew—*hope* .

My family began to breathe again. We had purpose. We had

movement. The heavy fog of grief began to lift, ever so slightly.

Time, like Emaan once said, really does heal the worst wounds.

Not by erasing them.

But by teaching us how to carry them.

Chapter 29: Drowned Horizons

The filter business had become our breathing space—stable, profitable, and rooted. But not all ventures bloom alike. When we tried introducing MF (Maintenance-Free) batteries to the market in Parachinar, they landed with a thud. The product was strong, the technology superior—but the price tag didn't match the pocket of our local buyers. People here chose affordability over longevity, and expensive batteries gathered dust on our shelves.

We couldn't afford to stall. So we did what resilient people always do—we adapted.

With help from friends and family, we scraped together enough money to secure the distribution of a well-known locally manufactured battery brand. It wasn't glamorous, but it was trusted. And in our town, trust was currency.

That move was a turning point. We officially named our business **Abbas Enterprises** , or simply **AE** . The name felt dignified—like a declaration that we had arrived, or at least, we were on our way.

Things began to shift quickly. For the first time in years, we breathed with some ease. Our finances improved. The home that had echoed with grief began to hum with life. My father —once bent with sorrow—stood taller, spoke louder, and smiled more. It was as if time had pressed rewind on his soul. My younger sisters found a safe and encouraging environment to study, dream, and flourish.

But while joy slowly returned to our home, a different tide was sweeping through Parachinar.

Australia.

A strange and dangerous craze had gripped the town. Young men, hungry for a better life, were leaving in droves— boarding rickety boats, trusting smugglers, risking death in the hope of asylum. They sailed into the Indian Ocean, believing Australia would welcome them with open arms.

One of them was my sister Anwar’s husband, **Mr. Mumtaz** . He had returned from the UAE restless and disillusioned. He wanted more. And so, against all our concerns, he joined one of the groups heading for the unknown.

Weeks passed in silence. Then, news came like a knife.

A boat had wrecked at sea.

It carried hundreds of boys. Most of them were from Parachinar. **Mumtaz was one of them** .

My sister was widowed. Again, grief settled into our home, this time darker and deeper. The ocean had taken him—and with him, so many others. Some of my childhood friends were among the missing. Their laughter, their faces, their plans—they all vanished beneath unforgiving waves.

But there was no time to pause.

Sorrow had visited too many times already. And strangely, in the face of so much loss, we found strength not in stillness—but in movement.

We buried our pain beneath paperwork and customer calls. We poured ourselves into the business, not because we were cold, but because it was the only way to survive.

In the middle of all this, came a ray of joy.

My younger sister **Naila** —our quiet, brilliant star—was accepted into one of the most prestigious medical universities in Lahore to study MBBS. The news was a spark in the darkness. For the first time in ages, we celebrated. It felt like redemption—her achievement was ours, too. She packed her bags and left for Lahore with pride in her eyes and the weight of our dreams on her shoulders.

And me? I still had a burning desire—for **Islamabad** .

I had always loved the city: its silence, its order, the smell of possibility in its clean air. I wanted to build something big there— **my own battery business** . But dreams, once again, required something I didn't have: capital.

So, I built a pitch deck. Polished it. Practiced it. And eventually convinced someone, a businessman of influence, to partner with me. He would provide 7 million rupees in investment; I would contribute my expertise, time, and effort.

He agreed.

I moved to Islamabad, hopeful and determined. I rented a shop in Rawalpindi, redesigned the interiors, and stepped into the market to negotiate distribution deals. Slowly, things took shape. The brands were willing. The setup was solid. All I needed was for the promised capital to flow as planned.

But reality, once again, turned sour.

Instead of receiving the agreed amount in full, I was given **tiny, delayed installments** . Four months passed, and only half of the promised capital had reached me. Still, I kept going —pushing forward, hoping it was just a matter of time.

Then came the blow.

The capital provider decided to back out.

He wasn't getting immediate profits and so, despite all his promises, he wanted his money back. I was stunned. Betrayed. But true to my nature—quiet, respectful, even timid in confrontation—I didn't argue. I didn't hold him accountable. I didn't raise my voice.

I simply sold an asset back in Parachinar—something I had held close for years—and exchanged it for a small piece of land in Islamabad. I gave that land to him and took full ownership of a business that was already bleeding.

It was the first time I felt **truly crushed by a partner** .

Still, I didn't quit.

I switched my focus to **retail** , where margins were better and transactions were in cash. But I had distribution deals in place —and each came with sales targets. That forced me to do **wholesale** , where sales were on credit, margins were thin, and cash flow was a constant struggle.

So I split my effort: wholesale in **Parachinar** , where the business was familiar and capital was relatively safe; and retail in **Islamabad** , where I slowly tried to find my footing again.

The setback taught me something I would never forget— **the wrong investor can ruin the right idea** .

My vision for Islamabad had not been realized—not the way I imagined. But I hadn't let it die. I was still there. Still building.

Eventually, things started to improve—incrementally. But my heart wasn't at peace. I was a big dreamer, after all, and I found myself confined to a small battery shop. I wanted scale. I wanted growth. I wanted someone to believe in me—not just with money, but with vision.

I needed an investor with patience. Someone who would let the tree grow before demanding fruit. But that kind of investor was nearly impossible to find in Pakistan.

Here, people don't invest—they **expect miracles** .

And the banks?

Banks only loan to those who don't need loans. In Pakistan, if you have no wealth, you have no leverage. Financial institutions exist not for dreamers, but for those who already sit atop mountains.

I was still climbing. With bare hands. No ropes.

But something inside me refused to let go of the mountain.

Chapter 30: Maan, The Music in My Words

It was during those quiet, restless days that I downloaded an Android app called Tango—a platform meant for finding friends, strangers, conversations.
A casual scroll. A match. A spark.
Her name was **Maan** . That's what I called her.
At first, we were just exchanging messages within the app. But something felt different. Her tone, her timing, her warmth—it wasn't just conversation, it was connection.
Soon, we exchanged numbers.
And then—I called her.
The first time I heard her voice, I froze.
It was ….. Graceful. Confident. Musical. Elegant.
She didn't just speak—she sang every sentence, in flawless, poetic Urdu that wrapped itself around your ears like velvet.
Every word she spoke made me fall a little deeper in love with the Urdu language itself.
And the way she spoke to me… was with profound respect.
She never once said my name outright.
Not once.
Except when she wanted to tease me—softly, playfully calling me "Kamar" instead of Qamar, putting deliberate emphasis on the "K."
That teasing felt like a secret between us. A signature of closeness.
Then came the day of our first video call.
And when I saw her face for the first time—I was stunned.
She was breathtaking.
Beautiful like a quiet sunrise.
Eyes that held poetry.
Expressions that danced with meaning.
I had never seen a woman like Maan before.
She wasn't just beautiful—she was complete.
Poetic. Graceful. Intelligent. Minimal. Confident. Musical. Funny. Elegant.
She could speak like a scholar, laugh like a child, and sing like a trained artist.
And oh—when she sang, it was as if a professional had taken over her voice. She didn't sing songs—she sang emotions.

I told her, again and again:
"You're a complete package."
I couldn't believe my luck.
Every day, we would talk for hours over video calls—exchanging jokes, poetry, songs, stories.
I would recite verses of the poetry to her. She would sing melodies I'd never heard.
Her favorite of mine was:
تو کہ آج قاتل ہے
پھر بھی راحتِ دل ہے
زہر کی ندی ہے تو
پھر بھی قیمتی ہے تو
"You, despite being lethal to me, are still the peace of my heart. You, though a river of poison, are still the most precious part."
Whenever I said this, she would go quiet for a second, as if drinking it in.
Then smile.
That smile was the reward I waited for.
We even laughed the same way.
The things that made me laugh—really laugh—made her laugh just as loud.
That's when I realized:
"If your girl doesn't laugh at a joke that feels funny only to you, then maybe she's not the one."
With Maan, it was different.
Every emotion I felt—she mirrored it.
We weren't just talking.
We were tuning into each other.
But then, one day, she told me.
She was already engaged to her cousin.
That single sentence fractured something inside me. Quietly. Irreversibly.
It felt like a sharp edge had run through the illusion I was living in.
And yet… I chose to stay in it.
I didn't run. I didn't leave.
Instead, I clung to that illusion with all I had.
Because being in love with her—even falsely—was better than

being without her.
I told her, half-joking, half-begging:
“One day, I’ll bring you back into my life… just like the magician in The Illusionist.
He created the perfect illusion and, in the end, he got the love of his life.”
I knew the truth.
I knew movies are fiction.
I knew life doesn’t always hand out happy endings to boys like me.
But still, I lied to her.
And to myself.
Not out of cruelty, but out of a desperate, quiet love.
I lied because I wanted the days to slow down,
because I wanted just a few more calls,
a few more poems,
a few more seconds of feeling like I belonged to someone—
and someone belonged to me.
If she ever reads this book—and I hope she does—
Maan, I want you to know:
I still love you.
I couldn’t stop it even if I tried.
You were—
you are—
the best thing that ever happened to me.
I want you to know that the day you got married,
I cried.
Loudly. Uncontrollably. Like a child losing his whole world.
And even though I knew you’d never come back,
I still whispered those same lies to you.
Just so the ending wouldn’t come so soon.
Just so we could live in the illusion a little longer.
A little sweeter.
I once promised you that if I ever wrote my life story, you’d have your chapter.
Well, here it is.
Because you deserve it.
Because you were real to me.

Because our love—however brief, however impossible—was pure.
We stayed connected for two years.
And then one day, it ended.
Just like that.
You got married. You moved on.
And I… stayed still.
I still have your pictures.
From those goofy, grainy childhood snaps,
to your elegant portraits as a grown up woman.
I've kept them all.
Not for obsession. Not for nostalgia.
But because some memories are too sacred to erase.
And some people… become entire seasons in your life.
In truth, I think I've only loved once.
Everything before you—was just confusion.
With you, it was clarity wrapped in beauty.
As one verse says:
وہ اتنا ڈھیر حسیں تھا کہ مجھ پہ لازم ہے
تمام عمر بچھڑنے کا غم کیا جائے
"She was beauty itself—so rare, so divine,
That I am bound to mourn her loss for all of time ."
Maan, if you're reading this—this part is for you:
تم کو دیکھا، تو میں سمجھا، ہوسکتاہے
اک انسان بھی پوری دنیا ہو سکتا ہے
"When I saw you, I realized—
Yes, it's possible…
One person can be a whole world."

Chapter 31: Boxes and Broken Deals

Let’s return to the road that mattered the most—my journey out of poverty.

The little business I had begun was still alive, still growing—slowly, stubbornly. I had carved out a small office inside the battery shop, no bigger than a storage room, but to me it was an empire-in-the-making.

One afternoon, as I was immersed in my work, an unfamiliar face from Parachinar walked in. He needed a backup battery for his home. We got talking. His background was in small trade. He asked about business, about margins, about what was worth pursuing. Then, casually, he said something that made me look up:

"I’m thinking of starting something. What if we do something together?"

I didn’t get excited.

I told him upfront—I couldn’t contribute capital. What I had was barely enough for the battery inventory I was juggling. But he was firm:

"You bring the time and skill. I’ll bring the money. Let’s build something."

I proposed engine oil distribution.

It was a smart move—engine oil and batteries served the same industry. I already had a pending offer from a reputable oil

company looking for a distributor in the twin cities. I told him:

"We'll run the operations from my current shop. Use the basement for inventory. I'll build the market—you just bring the capital."

He liked the plan. He said he needed some time to think.

Days turned into weeks. We refined the idea, aligned our roles, prepared agreements. Everything was set.

Then came the morning of the deal.

He wasn't picking up.

I called again.

And again.

Silence.

I went to his home. He finally appeared—reluctant, uneasy.

"I've changed my mind. I've joined a friend in construction contracting."

Just like that, the deal vanished.

I shook his hand and said:

"Best of luck."

The engine oil opportunity went to someone else.

And I went back to my batteries.

Two months later, the same man returned.

He sat down like nothing had happened and said:

"Let's start something together."

I smiled. "The oil business is gone," I told him. "But I'll think of something else."

And I did.

After weeks of research and restless thinking, I landed on something bold:

Corrugated packaging.

We barely scraped together 3 million rupees—a laughable figure for setting up a manufacturing business. But I had

learned one thing over the years: capital is not courage, and ideas don't wait for perfect timing.

So we jumped in.

We bought basic machinery from Lahore, rented a hall on the outskirts of the city, and found some skilled laborers who knew how to work the cutters, presses, and stitchers.

Within three months, the factory was running.

I didn't know much about packaging, but I knew its power.

Packaging was the face of every product, the first impression, the silent salesman. With corrugated packaging, we weren't bound to a single industry—we could serve pharmaceuticals, food chains, electronics, retail, agriculture. This wasn't just a business. It was a window into how every other business operated.

I learned pricing and costing from a generous supplier—paper formulas, sheet calculations, stitching cost per unit. I soaked it all in.

We hired a young marketing graduate who got us our first contracts from pharma companies. The orders were small, but steady.

Three months in, we were running out of space.

We needed more machines, more space, and more speed to meet new demands.

But we were stuck.

So I pitched the expansion idea to a new investor. After several meetings and an aggressive business plan, he agreed.

We moved to a larger facility and installed additional machinery and equipment.

That's when I made my second mistake:

I let the investor-partner lead the factory operations. While I served as the CEO.

He was a man of zero confidence. A prisoner of hesitation.

He couldn't take a decision—not even small ones. And he had mastered the art of avoiding blame by avoiding choices altogether.

Every problem was someone else's fault. Every delay was excused by someone else's mistake.

And when you're running a manufacturing unit, indecision is the most expensive thing you can afford.

But I didn’t give up.

I adjusted. Recalibrated. Took over most of the operational decisions informally—while still letting him play boss to preserve his ego.

Because I had learned this too: leadership isn’t about position—it’s about momentum.

I wasn’t in business to impress anyone. I was in it to escape poverty.

And for that, I was willing to learn, suffer, compromise—and win.

Chapter 32: Farhan, The Boy Who Believed

After three months of energetic hustle, our marketing manager resigned. It wasn’t a surprise—people come and go when the pressure rises—but it left me once again wearing too many hats.

I needed someone new.

Not just a resume. Not just a degree.

I needed someone like me.

That's when a friend introduced me to Farhan Khan—an 18-year-old Pathan boy, born in the mountains but raised in Karachi.

The first time he walked into my office, he was fidgeting.

He stuttered. He stumbled through his sentences.

But he had something that no CV could ever show:

Unshakable confidence.

That raw, untamed kind that life gives you—not schools.

I offered him a seat.

He sat like he already belonged.

I asked, "You ever done marketing?"

He said, "No, but I can talk. And I learn fast."

That was enough for me.

I had dealt with “experienced professionals” before—big talkers, small doers, men who wore fancy shirts but couldn’t write a simple email or make a convincing sales call. All they really wanted was a high salary and a low workload.

I was done with that breed.

I didn’t want people with perfect English.

I wanted people with fire.

And I saw that in Farhan.

He asked for a modest salary and a motorcycle. I agreed on the spot.

The next day, I bought him a motorcycle and he reported for duty.

That very first week, he proved he was more than just a marketing hire—he was a mirror of the younger me.

Hungry. Relentless. Loyal.

I started mentoring him myself.

I taught him everything I knew—pricing, cold pitching, sales psychology, negotiation, packaging standards. He absorbed every lesson like it was sacred.

He didn't just apply the lessons—he elevated them.

In Pakistan, getting a meeting with a procurement officer or CEO without a prior appointment is like breaking into a fortress.

But Farhan? He'd trick receptionists, outwit guards, fake appointments, and somehow always walk into boardrooms like he belonged there.

"How did you get in this time?" I'd ask.

He'd laugh and say, "Bas, bhai jan… trick laga diya."

His stories were hilarious. But his results? Legendary.

Soon, he was bringing in contracts from top-tier companies.

All this, with a stammer in his speech and no formal training.

But clients didn't care. Because he delivered.

He didn't talk his way in.

He proved his way in.

We became more than colleagues.

He became my sounding board—the only person I could share my real dreams with.

The ones that kept me awake at night.

The ones that felt too big to say out loud.

I told him I wanted to build something bigger than packaging.

That I wanted to build an empire of ethical businesses—by the people, for the people.

He listened quietly. Always nodded. Always believed.

And somehow, when he believed, I believed harder.

Farhan didn't just bring contracts.

He brought conviction back into my heart.

He showed me that loyalty, learning, and courage can still exist in a world full of ego and excuses.

He showed me that you don’t need a suit to build something big. You just need someone who shows up every day and says:

“Let’s go, bhai jan. What’s next?”

Farhan Khan was—and still is—the best thing that ever happened to me in my entrepreneurial journey.

Because every founder, no matter how self-made, needs someone who says:

"You’re not crazy. I see it too."

And Farhan saw it.

All of it.

Chapter 33: The Startup Circus

By 2017, startups had become a religion in Pakistan.

Words like entrepreneurship, pitch decks, funding rounds, and unicorns were thrown around like confetti at a wedding.

Everyone with a smartphone and a half-baked idea called themselves a founder. It was less about building something real—and more about the aura of being a CEO.

Apps like Careem, Uber, Foodpanda, and Daraz had transformed the urban landscape—and they became the poster boys of this new startup era. Every young man with a Wi-Fi connection wanted to build the “next big thing.”

Social media became a flood of startup memes, screenshots of dashboards, and motivational posts copied from Elon Musk, Steve Jobs or Jack Ma.

And then came the flood of "startup gurus."

Guys with zero real business experience, offering flashy webinars with titles like:

“How to Raise Your First Million Dollars”

“Secrets to Getting VC Funding”

“Pitch Like a Billionaire”

Every second ad on Facebook was another workshop—taught by someone who had never sold a single product in their life.

Curious but skeptical, I decided to enter the scene.

I started attending startup seminars, incubation expos, and networking meetups. I wanted to see for myself—was this a real movement of innovation… or just noise?

The answer became clear fast.

Most of the people there were chasing titles, not traction.

Everyone wanted to be the CEO of something, even if they had no team, no product, no customer—not even a prototype.

One day, I visited a prestigious startup incubation center in Islamabad.

The hall was buzzing with energy—young men in sweatshirts and sneakers, girls in designer abayas holding MacBooks, all sipping expensive coffee and talking big.

But when we actually sat down with the so-called “incubated startups”… disappointment hit.

One “founder” pitched an app for renting bikes.

Another was building “Pakistan’s first online T-shirts’ store.”

Another wanted to create a “Netflix for children’s Islamic cartoons.”

None of them had a working prototype.

Most of them didn’t even know their unit economics.

Some didn’t know what profit margin meant.

Yet they proudly called themselves tech entrepreneurs.

I was shocked to see how they were being mentored and supported with free space, stipends, and training, while real businesses in the market—sweating every day for survival—were ignored because they weren’t "disruptive" enough.

It was like a circus of buzzwords over business.

When I asked one of the incubated startups about their competitors, he said:

“There are none.”

I asked, “Then who will you replace?”

He smiled, “Nobody. We’re unique.”

I asked if he had users.

He said, “InshaAllah, once we raise seed funding, we’ll start development.”

There was no prototype. No customers. No proof. Just hopes and hashtags.

I realized something.

In Pakistan, entrepreneurship had become a fashion trend. A label you wear to feel important.

People didn’t want to build—they wanted to be seen building.

They didn’t want to earn—they wanted to raise.

They didn’t want profits—they wanted PowerPoint slides with hockey-stick graphs and someone to write them a cheque.

But I didn’t come from pitch decks and co-working spaces.

I came from mud houses, hunger, sleepless nights, and real business.

I had sold batteries shop to shop. I had fought for packaging contracts in markets full of sharks. I had counted coins to make payroll.

So when I sat among these “incubated entrepreneurs,” I didn’t feel inspired.

I felt insulted.

But I didn’t walk away angry.

I walked away clear.

Clear that my kind of entrepreneurship was different.

It wasn’t about going viral—it was about building value.

It wasn’t about raising funds—it was about raising yourself.

So while they ran after accelerators and photo ops, I went back to my office, turned off my phone, opened my ledger, and said:

Let’s build something real.

Chapter 34: Real Innovation, Real Frustration

I've always believed in practical entrepreneurship—not just fancy tech jargon or startup theater, but real-world solutions that solve real-world problems.

So I decided to bring innovation to my battery business—not through technology for the sake of sounding "innovative," but by actually improving the experience for the customer.

I rebranded the business as Batterylala.

We built a proper e-commerce website, listed our batteries, published our services, and launched it with pride. It wasn't revolutionary in terms of flashy tech, but it addressed actual pain points.

And that, to me, was true innovation.

But batteries aren't like clothes or books.

A customer doesn't order one "just in case."

They need it right now.

Because their car is dead, their UPS has failed, or the power is out.

This urgency meant the typical 3–5 day e-commerce delivery model simply didn’t work. And there were more layers to the problem:

1 . Installation was required. Most people don’t know how to install a battery.

2 . Old battery exchange was a key part of the pricing, and e-commerce courier partners couldn't handle the price adjustment.

3 . Trust—people weren’t ready to order a technical product like a battery without human interaction.

This is where Batterylala stood apart.

We introduced three-hour delivery and installation across Rawalpindi and Islamabad.

We trained our team. We deployed our own riders. We made it work.

And customers loved it.

I created demo videos explaining the service. We marketed on Facebook. Soon, the calls started coming in—inquiries, orders, and appreciation.

We were growing.

But then came the startup world rejection.

We applied to the National Incubation Center.

They rejected Batterylala, saying “selling batteries online is not innovative.”

To them, importing a cheap 3D printer from China and printing plastic toys was innovation.

To them, controlling a lightbulb with a smartphone was “disruption.”

They celebrated teenagers selling T-shirts with funny slogans online, or buying IoT kits from Saddar and uploading demo videos of blinking LEDs. That was “cutting-edge.”

But we? We were just selling batteries. Too boring. Too conventional.

Too… real.

I tried to explain to the “startup ecosystem gurus” that Pakistan isn’t ready for pure innovation.

We need to first build profitable, sustainable me-too models—models that copy what works, serve our people, and generate value.

Innovation can come later—once we’ve built the economic engine to fund it.

But no one listened.

Maybe I was wrong.

Maybe they were.

To this day, I’m still trying to decide.

But I wasn’t alone in my mission.

Farhan, my right-hand man, my friend, my co-dreamer—was with me every night, every step.

We’d sit late into the night, discussing Batterylala, how to scale it, and the other big dream we held close to our hearts:

Wallnerd .

Wallnerd was our moonshot—a vision to build a social learning network.

A kind of “Facebook for students and teachers,” where classes, notes, discussions, and even assessments could live in one platform.

It was ed-tech with heart. And Farhan? He was romantically in love with the idea.

He wanted to launch it as soon as possible.

We pitched Wallnerd to a few investors, looking for support to build a prototype.

Nobody bit.

They either didn’t understand the concept or were too busy chasing their own “Uber for X” fantasies.

Back in the real world, Batterylala was taking off—but we needed capital to grow.

We wanted to:

Expand to other cities

Build inventory

Partner with more battery brands

Scale our logistics

So we took a bold step—we pitched Batterylala on Pakistan's version of Shark Tank.

"Idea Croron Ka."

We traveled to Lahore.

I gave the best pitch of my life—simple, clear, and confident. The audience loved it.

The judges gave a public commitment to invest.

It felt like our moment.

But behind the cameras?

Nothing happened.

Just like most things in Pakistan's startup scene—it was all for show.

The "investors" were influencers in disguise. They wanted

visibility, not accountability.

They wanted to be seen on TV—not be listed in shareholder agreements.

And once again, we were back to where we started:

A great idea, a real business, and no money.

Just like we had done with batteries, we also wanted to bring innovation to packaging.

The traditional packaging industry was boring—brown boxes, dull prints, outdated designs. It didn't reflect the evolving taste of modern businesses or customers.

We wanted to create packaging that was functional, beautiful, and brand-driven. Farhan and I proposed fresh ideas—custom cuts, vibrant prints, thematic boxes.

But our clients weren't ready.

They saw the designs, loved them… until they saw the price.

Innovation wasn't cheap. And in their minds, packaging was still just a container—not a brand statement.

After several failed pitches and constant friction with our existing factory partner, we realized: We needed creative freedom.

So, we made a difficult decision—to exit our packaging partnership.

It was a clean break. No drama. Just the understanding that it was time to do things our own way.

We launched a new venture and named it: Lalapack.

Lalapack was different from day one.

We set up an e-commerce website where customers could design and order custom packaging online—for birthdays, weddings, anniversaries, corporate events.

We offered personalization at scale, something nobody in the region was doing.

The vision was bold. The market was unexplored.

And just as Lalapack was beginning to take shape…

life took a turn in another direction.

In the middle of all this entrepreneurial chaos, a new woman entered my life.

Her name was Munazzah.

My mother had chosen her for me. She had heard about her from relatives, and spoke of her with admiration—her beauty, her manners, her education.

“She’s studying in one of the top colleges in Peshawar,” my mother said proudly, “She’s a smart, good girl.”

I didn’t resist.

Maybe it was the emotional emptiness after losing Maan, or maybe I was just too tired to fight fate.

I said yes.

We fixed a date for the engagement.

That’s how marriages happen in our tribal society—quiet conversations among elders, exchanged phone numbers, a date picked over tea.

Eventually, I spoke to Munazzah.

She was… different.

She wasn’t Maan. That was obvious. But I wasn’t looking for another Maan—I knew that chapter of my heart had closed.

Munazzah was decent, respectful, and traditional. She wasn’t

poetic, nor wild, nor extraordinary. But she was good. And in this world, that counts for a lot.

Then came Covid.

A lockdown nation. A shuttered world. And somehow, in that strange silence, my engagement was finalized.

But even before the engagement, there was friction.

Our first fight happened because she wasn't satisfied with the engagement arrangements. She wanted it to be more traditional, more festive, more elaborate.

And I… I was still emotionally living somewhere between a startup pitch and a lost love.

Still, I reminded myself that expectations must be respected.

So I stayed calm.

The engagement took place. The families celebrated. The photos were clicked. And I returned to Islamabad to continue chasing the dream.

Chapter 35: Tiloyo, A Brand Is Born

As the dust settled on our earlier ventures, we refocused our energy on reshaping our packaging business—but this time, with sharper strategy and a bolder vision.

That's when Ahmad Raza joined our team.

He was young, sharp, and driven—a boy from Okara who learned faster than anyone I'd ever worked with. His speed, curiosity, and focus on perfection made him the perfect lead for our new phase of operations.

With Ahmad handling the factory operations, our ideas started turning into actual products. And one day, an idea struck:

"Why not launch our own FMCG brand?"

Packaging had taught us how brands look. Now we wanted to build something that was a brand.

We brainstormed names. We wanted something light, catchy, and global. A name that could live on supermarket shelves across countries.

We finally called it: **Tiloyo** .

Tiloyo was our leap of faith into the world of Fast-Moving Consumer Goods.

We decided to start with tissue paper—an overlooked product that had never really seen innovation in Pakistan.

Instead of manufacturing tissue ourselves, we sourced high-quality rolls from importers. Our factory focused on what we did best: design and packaging. We trained our workers, perfected our wrapping techniques, tested box cuts and finishes.

We created many variants of Tiloyo:

Toilet Rolls. Kitchen Rolls. Tissue Boxes. Pocket Tissues

A Flagship Car Tissue Variant—sleek, minimal, luxury-grade

The designs were stunning. So stunning that people kept asking, “Is this an imported brand?”

That was the greatest compliment.

Tiloyo didn’t look like a product from a startup in Islamabad. It looked like something that belonged on the shelf next to Kleenex or Fine. And for us, that meant success even before our first sale.

But beautiful branding needs one more thing: distribution.

We needed someone who could take this to the market with firepower.

I approached Mr. Ahsan, a seasoned sales veteran with years of experience in pharmaceutical sales. He was a friend-of-a-friend from Peshawar, and I had been watching his journey for a while.

“I want you to lead the sales of Tiloyo,” I told him. “Not just as an employee… but as a partner.”

I offered him partial ownership in the brand, and without hesitation, he accepted.

We were ready.

It was the COVID-19 era.

But strangely enough, this timing worked in our favor. The world was suddenly more hygiene-conscious than ever. Tissues were flying off the shelves everywhere.

We had already stocked up an impressive inventory of all our SKUs. So we didn’t wait.

Tiloyo was officially launched—right in the middle of a global pandemic.

And our hunt began for distributors across Pakistan.

We got a distributor from the heart of Balochistan.

Mr. Haider Khan Kakar, a former pharmaceutical sales professional from Quetta, had recently quit his job to chase his dream of entrepreneurship. He was sharp, articulate, and battle-tested in the trenches of field sales.

Farhan had seen the spark in him right away. He was gifted at recognizing raw potential—the kind that doesn't show up on a resume.

It was August 2020 when Farhan approached Haider with a proposal to join Team Tiloyo. Without much deliberation, Haider packed his bags and left for Islamabad. But here's the most impressive part—on his journey from Quetta to Islamabad, Haider secured two distributors. Before even stepping into our new office, he had opened up two cities.

That move alone earned him the respect and trust of our entire team.

At that time, our tissue rolls were still being procured from Lahore, where we found superior printing and packaging capabilities. So we decided to relocate manufacturing to Lahore.

Ahmad Raza, our ever-reliable operations lead, shifted there, found a suitable production facility, and supervised the

transfer of all machinery. He set up everything from scratch again—with speed and precision.

Meanwhile, I officially registered “Lalapack” as a company and gave 5% equity to each of my key teammates—Ahmad, Haider, Farhan, and Ahsan—reserving the remaining shares for potential investors we hoped to bring on board in the future.

We hired a car and began what we proudly called our “Distributor Hunting Campaign.”

Haider, now fully immersed in the field, recruited sales professionals from both the pharmaceutical and FMCG industries, offering competitive salaries to attract top talent. Their mission was simple: open new cities. Each sales lead was responsible for finding a main distributor in their assigned region and ensuring that secondary sales—the actual movement of products to retail shops—would follow through.

Our branding was our secret weapon. From the product feel to the aesthetic of the packaging, Tiloyo looked global. Within just two months, our distribution map covered key cities across Khyber Pakhtunkhwa, Balochistan, and Punjab.

But we were still running on borrowed fuel.

Our working capital was funded not by banks or investors, but by our distributors—every carton they ordered enabled the next production cycle. We had little room for error. The model gave them a big chunk of the margins, but it was a lifeline we couldn't yet replace.

And then came the cracks.

Despite our presence in hundreds of retail outlets, including major retail chains, some of our sales reps failed to hit their targets—and we were burning through high salary payments.

It hit me hard.

We had made "primary sales"—selling to the distributors—but what mattered more was the "secondary sales" to actual end customers. That's what created real brand loyalty. That's what brought repeat orders.

In the meantime, Farhan was proving himself again.

While many on the team were just getting warmed up, he was securing space for Tiloyo in major chain stores across Islamabad. He met the CEOs himself—charming, convincing, persistent—and brought Tiloyo to their shelves. His stammer didn't hold him back. In fact, it made him even more sincere.

But something had changed between us.

Farhan was still my closest teammate, yet the demands of expansion—managing new hires, dealing with investors,

overseeing strategy—pulled me away from our old rhythm. We no longer had those late-night brainstorms over chai. I missed that, and I knew he did too.

Still, we both kept moving.

Our next milestone was massive: Karachi.

Ahsan and Haider flew to the southern metropolis and signed a major distributor for the entire province of Sindh. It was a game-changer. The distributor invested a significant sum upfront, taking Tiloyo into the most competitive market in the country.

We celebrated the deal—but I remained grounded.

I was obsessed with one question: Were people actually using Tiloyo? Were they buying it again? Were they choosing us not because of availability, but because of quality?

Back in Islamabad, we moved into a proper corporate office—a symbol of what we were building.

It had everything: a conference room, dedicated departments, and offices lined with framed packaging of our SKUs. Fine furniture filled each corner, and a compact kitchen brewed tea and coffee for our growing team and visiting clients.

From a room in a rented warehouse, we had built something

real.

And yet I knew—the real test was just beginning

Chapter 36: Where the Real Lessons Began

If there was a true turning point in my entrepreneurial journey—a chapter where I graduated from “trying things” to building things with intention—it was Tiloyo.

Tiloyo wasn’t just a tissue brand. It was a startup in its purest form—rooted in a vision, built from limited capital, scaling through design and hustle. And most importantly, it became my crash course in real-world business: product development, branding, team dynamics, channel distribution, and operational risk—all converging under one fragile roof.

This was where I finally understood what brand positioning really means.

> **“A brand is not what you say about yourself—it's what the market feels when they touch you.”**

That feeling, that gut-level perception, begins the moment they see your product. And nothing ignites that faster than packaging.

I had learned the hard way that in retail, your packaging is your first pitch—your salesperson on the shelf. So I went all in. I taught myself Adobe Illustrator, studied FMCG packaging benchmarks, deconstructed the branding playbooks of Unilever and Procter & Gamble. Then, I opened my laptop and designed every Tiloyo variant myself.

The outcome? Our tissue packaging didn't look local. It didn't whisper—it spoke. It had presence. People asked if it was an imported brand. That's when I knew: **we had built perception equity before performance** .

Haider, my sales head, observed every design iteration closely. Soon, he began playing with Illustrator too—sketching ideas, copying my workflows, trying to learn the mechanics of visual persuasion. We weren't just building a team. We were building entrepreneurial instincts.

But while the brand identity was thriving, the organization beneath it was fraying at the edges.

We had now crossed 50 employees—a psychological threshold. The lean startup structure was stretching. And I began encountering a classic scaling dilemma:

How do you maintain discipline and drive in people who aren't founders?

Most of our team, especially in field sales, were from non-academic backgrounds. Many were untrained, unstructured, and worst of all—unaccountable.

I suspected dual employment. Some were taking salaries from us while working for other brands on the side. Others were padding reports, fabricating visits, and inflating order sizes. But they were in cities I couldn't physically reach.

I realized I wasn't just managing employees—I was managing information asymmetry.

So I started building our internal Sales Ops dashboard—a cloud-based reporting system for sales reps. It was rudimentary, but it forced daily check-ins, geo-tagged visits, and target tracking. I wanted performance visibility, not verbal updates.

Yet even with systems in place, I learned a hard truth of early-stage FMCG:

You can’t automate character.

And most field reps didn’t care about mission, brand, or culture. They just wanted salaries and commissions. They didn’t understand that we were building something meaningful—something that could scale nationally and possibly even regionally.

But I understood.

Tiloyo was not just product-market fit. Tiloyo was founder-market obsession.

No one tells you this when you start a business in Pakistan, but let me say it loud:

When you have no capital, leadership becomes a tightrope.

I wasn’t just underfunded—I was emotionally underpowered in front of my own teammates. Every time I had to assert authority, my inner voice hesitated:

“How can I demand excellence from people who know I can’t pay their salary on time if things go wrong?”

So I chose the only leadership style I could afford—

friendship .

I led with warmth instead of authority. With favors instead of deadlines. I tried to keep the fire burning not through pressure, but through belief. That's all I had to offer: **vision** .

But vision doesn't move production lines.

And our production lines were painfully human.

We were still operating manually—folding, cutting, packing—one sheet, one roll, one hand at a time. No automation, no buffer stock, no leverage. Our timelines were dictated not by market demand but by distributor payments. We produced only when we were paid, and shipped only when it was ready. That meant:

No inventory to entertain small wholesalers

No instant fulfillment

No ability to scale margins

We were a reactive factory, not a proactive brand.

And yet, the brand was strong. Demand was real. Every product we sold was validating our design thesis. Every reorder meant Tiloyo was resonating. But the opportunity was

outpacing the engine.

I knew we had a Ferrari brand but we were riding it on donkey wheels.

What we needed was capital. Not just for production, but for storage, logistics, marketing, and machinery. But raising investment in Pakistan—especially during the uncertainty of the COVID-19 lockdowns—was like looking for rain in the desert.

Investors were either:

Scared and sitting on their money, or

Clout-chasing, only interested in “tech” ventures with shiny buzzwords and pitch decks that sounded like TED Talks.

And we weren’t offering machine learning, blockchain, or disruption. We were offering a tissue roll with world-class packaging.

Nobody wanted to fund that.

But I knew something they didn't:

Brands are built in trenches—not pitch rooms.

And Tiloyo was my trench. Bleeding quietly. But still moving forward.

Chapter 37: The Knife in the Back

It was the third month since Tiloyo had launched nationwide.

I was in my office, seated beneath the soft hum of the overhead fan, scanning the salary sheet in front of me. It was heavy—financially and emotionally. A seven-figure payout to the sales team, a growing list of operational costs. And then I made the call that changed everything.

I picked up the phone and started calling our distributors.

The numbers didn’t add up.

Sales were sluggish. Reorders were few. Shelves weren’t moving. The beautifully packaged products we had built with blood and belief were now just sitting in retail coolers—quiet, forgotten, unsold.

I called one of my important teammates into my office.

He smiled like everything was fine, as if the ship wasn’t taking on water.

I asked him about the sales performance. He deflected. Lied. Invented excuses. One after another. Then, mid-conversation, casually dropped that he’d be heading to his hometown the next day for his engagement and would be off for three days.

I nodded. I didn’t want to ruin his moment. I told him to go.

The next morning, I came to the office.

It was silent.

Chairs were empty. Phones unanswered. The staff was missing. At first, I thought it was a coincidence. A bad day. But then it was the second day. Then the third.

No one was picking my calls.

> **My teammates—my co-founders, my brothers-in-arms—had vanished.**

On the third day, Farhan came. He was with another teammate.

But the Farhan I had known was missing behind his eyes. His voice was different. Cold. He sat beside the other, who began to speak with aggression and blame—as if I had wronged them. His tone was sharp, rehearsed. The script had been written already.

And then the curtain was pulled.

They had registered a new company, declared one of them as CEO, and already started selling Tiloyo stock—my stock, our brand—into the market as their own.

The machinery, which I had personally supervised being moved to Lahore… The stock, which I had paid for through blood and borrowed trust… The distribution network, which I had built city by city, call by call…

—was all gone. Hijacked.

My own team, the people I had trusted with everything, had stolen the dream we built together.

The thing that hurt me the most was the family of one of the teammates—his father, his brothers—were deeply involved. One of them had already pitched an inflated lie about the profitability of the business to our Karachi distributor, who in return had promised investment in their new venture. The same distributor I was once happy to onboard under Tiloyo, was now funding my betrayal.

The truth hit me like a car crash in slow motion:

The team I built. The people I called my friends.

The brothers I shared my nights, dreams, fears and vision with—

Had sold me out.

And I?

I was left with just a name:

Tiloyo .

And the scars of a business stolen.

When I finally took legal action and pushed back, they had no choice but to return what was rightfully mine—the factory.

But it came at a cost.

Along with the factory, they dumped all the unsold and undelivered stock—worth millions—onto my shoulders. They had already taken the money from the distributors, left promises behind, and now the broken supply chain and angry retailers were my responsibility.

It was like being handed a sinking ship after someone had already drilled holes in the hull and jumped overboard.

And then it got worse.

One of the distributors from Peshawar—a known drug addict and close friend of one of the teammates—walked into my office. He placed a gun on the table. The weight of it was heavier than steel; it carried all the threat in the world.

With cold eyes, he told me to sign a document agreeing to return or sell his stock. He demanded a security cheque. I was outnumbered, unarmed, and out of options.

I signed .

Because when a gun is on the table, equity and ego disappear.

After they left, I sat still for a long time. Not from fear. From realization.

This wasn't just about betrayal anymore. This was about survival.

I immediately took control of the factory. One by one, I called every distributor and employee. I told them the truth. No sugar-coating. No drama. Just the raw truth.

Some listened.

Some stood beside me. Their loyalty restored my faith in humanity. They knew the brand was built by me—not by those who hijacked it overnight.

But the sales staff… most of them were playing both sides.

They were hypocrites—taking salaries from me while offering loyalty to my former partners. It was disheartening. I had built a family. Now I was standing in its broken ruins.

I was standing in the middle of a battlefield—unarmed, outnumbered, but not finished.

So I dusted myself off. Took a deep breath. And pivoted.

I started doing what I had always done best—building from scratch. I knew the only way forward was to bring in capital. And for the first time, I was willing to give up equity in Tiloyo.

I started knocking on doors.

I pitched my company.

I pitched my story.

I offered 30% equity in Tiloyo—for someone who could bring the capital I needed to keep this dream alive.

Because despite all the chaos…

The factory was still standing. The brand still had life. And I… I was not done yet.

Chapter 38: The Final Curtain

Eventually, an investor stepped forward for Tiloyo—but not without compromises.

First, I settled for less than I needed. Half the capital, at best.

Second, I had to give away 50% equity in the company I had built from dust.

We formalized the verbal agreement, drew the lines clearly, and shook hands. I hoped it would be different this time. But hope in business is a dangerous currency—it burns faster than cash.

The capital began trickling in—not as a lump sum, but in small, erratic installments. It was just enough to keep the machine gasping, never enough to let it breathe. Most of it evaporated in operating costs—salaries, rent, logistics—leaving nothing for what really mattered: machinery, automation, and scaling.

When he had paid around 40% of the agreed amount, the tap stopped. He began asking for returns, for profit, for results—as if Tiloyo was a vending machine, not a bleeding startup.

> **Once again, I was back where I had been so many times: abandoned mid-journey by someone who never understood the road.**

He claimed he couldn't sell his real estate in time. I claimed I couldn't pull a miracle without the capital. And so began the blame game.

But I didn't have the luxury of debates. Salaries had to be paid. Rent was due. Bills were knocking.

So I did what every founder fears—but sometimes must do.

> **I fired the entire team, except a few hands to help**

me shut the lights down gently.

I sold off the remaining assets at distress prices, just enough to settle the books and clear the payables. No pride, no ego—just the cold discipline of responsibility.

And then, quietly, I closed Tiloyo.

No public post. No grand farewell.

Just a quiet, personal goodbye to a brand that was built with vision, grit, heartbreak, and hope.

On the other side of the city, the old teammates had already launched their own tissue paper brand. The factory was close to my former unit in Lahore.

One of them was now a self-declared CEO.

Another was leading his production.

Another—was heading their sales.

One of them, I heard, had been cut out of their story. But that didn't matter anymore.

Tiloyo was over.

And with it, I had closed the chapter of packaging in my life forever.

One thing I will always respect about Haider: he was a big thinker. No matter where he worked, he raised the bar so high that the whole organization started breathing in that elevated air—sometimes choking, sometimes thriving—but never settling for average.

Another rare trait he carried was bold execution. Haider was a doer. He didn't freeze in fear. He jumped—sometimes foolishly, often fearlessly.

I cannot deny this truth: he made Tiloyo touch all of Pakistan.

For the first time in my life, my product reached every corner of the country. That mattered. That will always matter. And Haider had made it possible.

Haider wasn't a designer, not really. But he had just enough exposure to the world of packaging, branding, and production under me that when he walked away, he walked with courage and curiosity. He tried to lead his own brand. He attempted to

be a CEO.

His personality was never built for leadership. His knowledge was far from complete. But he tried. And trying—really trying—is something I respect.

Then there was Farhan.

Farhan was not born to betray. He was misled, caught in the wrong wind at the wrong time. I had grown distant. My attention had spread thin across new teammates. And in those brief windows of insecurity, he found validation in the wrong camp.

Haider's ambition must have looked like destiny. The energy of their rebellion must have felt like a revolution. And Farhan —who had once been my shadow—chose to walk in someone else's light.

And yet…

I never stopped believing that Farhan loved me. Maybe like a younger brother. Maybe like a comrade. Certainly like someone who once believed we could conquer the world together.

I was destroyed, yes.

But not bitter.

I carry no resentment, only the lessons.

I have respect for Haider—for showing me the scale at which ideas can operate, even when birthed in chaos.

I have affection for Farhan—for his innocence, his loyalty once, and the warmth he brought into my entrepreneurial life.

I forgave them both. Long before they ever asked for it. Maybe they never will. Maybe they don't even know they need it.

But that's the difference between leaders and those who leave.

We move forward.

Chapter 39: DILOYO – A Dream in Glass

After enduring the blows of betrayal, failed partnerships, and hollow investment promises, I sat down one night, quietly, and asked myself a tough question:

“What kind of business can I build without begging for capital?”

I needed a model that ticked off four essential boxes:

Minimal capital requirement

High margins

Human resource control

Scalability into a strong consumer brand

And from the depth of past disappointments, DILOYO emerged—an idea I had once scribbled during my packaging

days. Back then, I had experimented with fruit gift boxes. Now, I was ready to disrupt the entire fruit retail industry.

The vision behind DILOYO was simple, yet powerful:

> **Transform the dirty, unhygienic fruit carts into elite, glass-covered retail stores—offering fresh, farm-picked fruits with premium packaging at the same price as the open market.**

It wasn't just about aesthetics—it was about value engineering. We aimed to build a full-stack fruits retail model:

Direct farm procurement to cut middlemen

Fresh juice sections to eliminate daily wastage

Dehydrator machines to convert unsold stock into branded dry fruits

We were thinking lean. Thinking smart.

Every rotten banana, every bruised apple had a second life in DILOYO.

Waste nothing. Package everything. Sell smart.

The brand had the soul of a street vendor but the body of a high-end retail store.

Yet again, the challenge stared me in the face: no capital.

So I pivoted with strategy— **franchising** .

I designed a plug-and-play franchise model:

The investor builds the DILOYO outlet

We run and operate it using best-in-class systems

Revenue is tracked through a custom-built ERP ensuring transparency, accountability, and operational control

It wasn't just a fruit store—it was a scalable brand in the making..

We finalized the architectural design of the outlet—sleek, compact, and radiating class. A store so refined it looked more like a flagship of an international lifestyle brand than a fruit shop. Frosted glass panels, backlit display counters, smart racks, and ambient lighting—all tailored to one goal: **make fruit shopping feel premium.**

But design was only half the story. **Hygiene was the core promise.**

Every staff member was trained in food handling. Gloves were mandatory. Uniforms were pressed daily. Smiles were part of the SOP. This wasn't just about cleanliness; it was about consumer trust, about offering a sensory shift—from grimy roadside stalls to fresh, fragrant elegance.

In those days, I used to say to myself:

"I'm not just opening a fruit outlet. I'm building a national brand from the pit of a mango."

And maybe, I really was.

This was my boldest experiment yet—my first attempt at a

true consumer retail brand. A model that could scale. A name that could live beyond me. Or… a dream that could die in silence. Either way, it was a step toward becoming the kind of entrepreneur I had always wanted to be.

I was fiercely optimistic. My gut told me: DILOYO will become the talk of the town.

And so I put it on paper.

I wrote the franchise literature myself—every line, every clause, every page designed to appeal to the common investor. We kept the franchise price intentionally low—to make it irresistible for middle-income dreamers who wanted to own a business but couldn't afford millions.

But to make the model sell, I did something crazy.

> **I promised a full refund of the investment if the franchise didn't work.**

Risky? Yes. Reckless? Possibly. But I had no choice.

Without that guarantee, I knew I wouldn't sell even a single franchise. Trust was currency, and I had none in the bank. So I put my integrity on the table.

This time, I was alone. No Haider, no Farhan, nobody.

I didn't have a sales team. I didn't have polished pitch decks. I didn't even have a car. But I had fire. I had clarity. And I had a dream wrapped in a fruit basket.

So I picked up my phone and started calling people—random contacts, distant cousins, curious friends, and unknown investors. I offered them a commission for every franchise they sold. It was hustle mode. Guerrilla mode. One-man army mode.

This was DILOYO. And this was me, building something from dust and desperation again.

Chapter 40: The First Flame of DILOYO

My first lead came from Peshawar—a surprising twist, considering I had envisioned Islamabad as the launchpad for DILOYO. But sometimes, destiny comes from the direction you least expect.

The lead was generated through a relative of mine whom I had appointed unofficially as a franchise sales rep, promising him a handsome commission on every successful deal. He wasn't a polished salesman, but he had access—and in business, sometimes access is more valuable than skills.

He had convinced one of his office colleagues—a thoughtful, practical man—who was looking for a small, manageable business to invest in. DILOYO checked all his boxes. What sealed the deal for him wasn't just the modernity of the idea or the aesthetics of the brand—it was the guaranteed investment refund clause.

In his words:

"I've never seen a business where the franchisor is ready to take all the risk. Either you're crazy, or you're onto something big."

I smiled and told him, "Maybe both."

At first, I hesitated.

Peshawar was conservative. A city of traditions. Would people accept a fruit retail brand wrapped in glass, aesthetics, and SOPs? Was it too soon for DILOYO in a city like this?

But then I looked at my options. I had no other lead from Islamabad. And hesitation doesn't pay salaries.

So I said yes.

There was another reason behind my acceptance: one store was never viable. DILOYO wasn't a standalone shop—it was a retail ecosystem. Our model was designed to work at scale. To fully operationalize the ERP, logistics, inventory management, and centralized supply chain, we needed at least 10 stores per city.

My relative in Peshawar—euphoric after closing the first deal—made a bold promise:

> **"I'll sell 9 more franchises before the first one even completes construction."**

I looked into his eyes. He believed it. And in that moment, so did I.

So I packed my bag, boarded the van to Peshawar, and walked the dusty streets of Warsak Road with my first franchisee. After days of searching, we found a decent location—a big shop, wide frontage, good visibility, and on a high footfall road.

We signed the first franchise agreement of DILOYO.

No music played. No crowd clapped. But in my heart, I knew: history had just been written in silence.

We rolled up our sleeves and began the construction.

DILOYO was no longer an idea.

It had now become a promise taking shape in bricks, glass, and fruit baskets.

I was all alone in Peshawar—far from my base, building a dream from scratch, brick by brick. So I called my brother Aamir from Parachinar. He had always been my silent strength, and when I asked, he didn't hesitate. He packed his bag and arrived, stepping into DILOYO not just as my sibling but as my partner, comrade, and co-founder in spirit. I officially made him Director.

Together, we built the first DILOYO outlet—sleeves rolled, hearts full.

After a month of relentless effort, the construction was complete. The branding, architecture, and layout were so beautifully executed that even we stood in awe of what we had made. We began deploying our equipment—juicers, coolers, racks, counters—and completed the store design down to the last detail.

The focused LED spotlights illuminating each fruit rack made the humble apples and pomegranates look like exotic jewels. A large digital LED board hung outside, displaying real-time fruit prices—transparent and dynamic, just as we promised.

Passersby slowed down to stare. Some stopped, some walked in, stunned by what they saw. They had never imagined a fruit shop could look like a luxury boutique. DILOYO was making noise—a quiet but powerful disruption in a conservative retail landscape.

But behind the glass walls and the polished aesthetics, I was calculating numbers.

The truth hit me hard: the franchise price was too low. It had barely covered the construction, even with our ruthless budgeting. In fact, for this first outlet, I had to contribute my own savings—my last reserves—just to get it completed.

And that’s when the entrepreneur’s eternal dilemma surfaced again:

> **How do you build something scalable with a model that bleeds in the beginning?**

I knew Pakistan's investor psychology too well by now. People here don't invest in visions—they invest in returns. And they want those returns yesterday.

We hired and trained a staff of six: fruit handlers, juicers, cashiers. Uniforms pressed, gloves on, SOPs memorized. We taught them hygiene, sales scripts, customer engagement. For most, it was their first formal job—and DILOYO was their first taste of discipline.

Finally, in July 2021, we opened doors.

The response? Beautiful—but complex.

People were fascinated, intrigued, and appreciative. Many were eager to experience something new. But a majority held back. The elegance of the store—the uniformed staff, the

lighting, the digital signage—intimidated them. They assumed DILOYO was too expensive, even though we were selling at the same rates as the cart vendors outside.

This perception barrier was real. And dangerous.

Meanwhile, the franchise sales efforts stalled. The same person who had promised to sell 9 more franchises was now fumbling, despite my direct involvement and relentless effort. No new franchise meant no bulk procurement. I was buying for just one outlet, which meant no price advantage, no economies of scale, and no profit margins.

> **DILOYO was a brilliant machine—but with just one piston firing** .

The consumer traction was promising, but the management model for a single unit wasn't feasible. I needed at least ten stores to activate the ERP backbone, optimize supply chains, and build economies around the brand.

So, with one store in motion in Peshawar, I handed operations to Aamir and boarded a van back to Islamabad. It was time to return home—not to rest, but to fight again on a more familiar battlefield.

Because one thing was certain:

> **DILOYO was real now. Alive. Breathing. Glowing in the streets of Peshawar.**

But to make it thrive—I had to make it a movement, not a shop.

Chapter 41: The Rebuild Begins

A window had opened—a real opportunity to build something iconic. The DILOYO model had potential. The problem was, I was still running solo. And no brand is built alone.

I knew I needed a team.

The first person I called was Farhan.

He had been more than a colleague; he was part of the DNA of my startup journey. When I shared the DILOYO blueprint with him—along with visuals and footage from our first outlet in Peshawar—he lit up with excitement. The fire in his eyes reminded me of the early days. He said just one thing: **“Let’s do it.”**

Then he added, “Haider’s tissue paper business is collapsing after a fallout with his partner. Why don’t we pull him in

too?”

The idea made sense.

Say what you will about Haider, he was a force of execution. He knew how to scale fast, how to break ground in new markets. I picked up the phone and pitched DILOYO to him. After watching the videos and hearing about the vision, he said yes. But there was a caveat—he needed a month to wrap up his existing commitments.

We couldn’t wait to start building the team.

Farhan introduced me to Qasim, a young distributor they had worked with before. When Qasim and I met, I saw a spark in him—the same kind of hunger I had carried in my own eyes years ago. Once I laid out the vision for DILOYO, he was in. No second thoughts.

That’s how we began the next chapter of DILOYO—from zero to traction again, this time in Islamabad.

Qasim led the franchise sales effort and brought in promising leads. I closed five deals back-to-back. We rolled out construction simultaneously across all five locations. The momentum felt organic—there was no paid marketing, no franchise exhibitions. It was all word-of-mouth, belief, and hustle.

The DILOYO value proposition was straightforward: a high-end retail fruit brand with a price tag as lean as $6,000 for full setup—including machinery, construction, merchandise, inventory, and branding. We charged zero franchise fee. Not a single rupee. This was about building the brand first, revenue second.

Meanwhile, Haider began operations in Quetta. In a matter of weeks, five more franchise deals were secured there too.

It felt like we were finally building a movement—across provinces, across cities, across all the pain of the past.

Our entire team had become obsessed with DILOYO. We weren't employees or executives—we were builders. Every one of us wore multiple hats: from franchise development and construction to HR, vendor negotiations, and logistics. We were operating like a true early-stage startup—lean, relentless, and full of heart.

Qasim proved to be one of the best decisions we made. He didn't just believe in the idea—he embodied it. He brought in high-quality people, each more committed than the last. His leadership was instinctive and hands-on. So, we elevated him to Chief Operating Officer. It was an earned title, not a given one.

By November, construction on our Islamabad-based franchises was complete. The outlets looked stunning—crystal-clear glass storefronts, elegant lighting, smart displays. They weren't fruit shops; they were showrooms of freshness. Haider flew in from Quetta to see them, and when he did, even he—who had seen big moves before—was speechless. He said, **"This doesn't look like Pakistan."**

We launched with modest events—no celebrities, no unnecessary PR. Just clean execution and operational excellence. And soon, DILOYO began attracting attention. Customers with higher spending power were impressed. But the everyday consumer was hesitant—our elite presentation made them assume we were expensive, even though our prices matched local carts and stalls.

That's when we had a strategic realization: we needed burn capital. We needed six months of financial runway just to build consumer trust and familiarity. To change habits. To fight perceptions. We also needed to implement our original plan of zero-waste through fruit dehydration units, so no unsold produce ever went to loss. Every piece of fruit had to have a revenue path—fresh, juiced, or dried.

My stores stood like diamonds in the middle of chaos—visually arresting, disruptive, and inspiring. People paused. People stared. We just had to make them walk in.

I knew I was now in a position to pitch real capital. I had a working model, a visible brand, a strong leadership team, and traction in multiple cities. We didn't just need investors—we needed believers. The right funding at this stage would mean creating Pakistan's first fruit retail unicorn. And we were aiming exactly for that.

Meanwhile, Haider activated new teams in Lahore and Peshawar, focusing on franchise sales. The machine was in motion. It felt like we had finally built something with the power to go national.

But just when everything was aligned—team, traction, visibility, and momentum—the worst thing in my life happened.

It didn't just slow me down.

It shattered me.

From the inside out.

Chapter 42: The Fall

It was the early morning of November 22nd, 2021. I was asleep in my flat when a loud knock jolted me awake. Still half-dreaming, I stumbled toward the door. As I opened it, three uniformed policemen stood in front of me—alongside the former Tiloyo distributor from Peshawar, the same drug-addicted extortionist who once walked into my office and forced me to sign papers at gunpoint.

Before I could process anything, one of the policemen grabbed my arm.

"**Pick up your phone,**" he ordered.

Confused, I complied. They entered the flat, confiscated my phone, and shoved me into a small car—the car of the distributor himself. It was a scene I had only watched in crime dramas. Now, I was living it.

They drove me to Gulbahar Police Station, Peshawar. My mind was racing. I had no pending case, no real dispute—so

why was I here? That's when it hit me: the old security cheque. The same cheque the distributor had extracted from me under threat. He had now used it to file a fabricated complaint, fully backed by bribes and forged documents.

What broke me wasn't just the betrayal—it was how systemically it was orchestrated.

One of my former teammates from Tiloyo—someone who once handled sales—had access to my signed letterheads. I had trusted him to speed up distributor documentation by pre-signing a few. He had handed one of those sheets to this man. On it, they had typed a fake declaration: that the stock had been returned and acknowledged by me. A complete lie, backed by a signature I had once written in good faith.

That night in custody, the officer who arrested me summoned me for questioning.

"**What's the password to your phone?**" he asked.

Naively, I told him—thinking it was part of some routine investigation. Only later would I realize the access they wanted wasn't for evidence, but for leverage.

The next morning, I was presented in court.

Within hours, I was sent to jail.

The cell they put me in for the first ten days was nothing short of a nightmare. A massive, overcrowded compound—hundreds of men, many of them addicted to drugs, others with criminal records for violence and murder. The air was heavy with sweat, filth, and hopelessness.

And there I was—a clean-handed, self-made entrepreneur. A man who had once pitched to investors, designed brands, and built startups from scratch—now caged among criminals, framed by a cartel of dishonesty.

I felt like a lion in a dogfight.

Still, I kept myself composed. I used the prison telephone to call Aamir. He was already in Peshawar. He had hired a lawyer and assured me, “Don’t worry. I’m handling everything.”

After ten days, I was shifted to another cell—a smaller one, shared with only ten inmates. Cleaner. Quieter. But no less

cruel.

Most of the boys there were young—barely out of their teens—but all were in for serious charges. Murder. Armed robbery. Attempted homicide. And yet, they treated me with respect. Maybe they sensed I didn't belong there. Maybe it was the way I carried myself. I had nothing in common with them, except that we were all prisoners now.

But the anger never left me.

Every time I looked at the cracked walls or felt the weight of the cell door closing behind me, I thought of that distributor. I thought of the former teammate. I thought of revenge. Vivid, dark thoughts filled my nights.

They didn't just take my freedom.

They took my dignity.

And in that prison cell, the fire inside me was reignited—not just to survive—but to fight back harder than I ever had before.

Every day in prison, I had two scheduled calls: one to Aamir, who was managing my legal battle, and the other to Haider,

who was running DILOYO. The business still needed to breathe, even if its founder was behind bars.

But just when I thought I had hit rock bottom, I found out there was still room to fall.

Through a bribe, the rogue distributor—the same one who had orchestrated my arrest—managed to obtain my mobile phone from the corrupt police officers. What he did next was malicious beyond words. He logged into all my accounts and deleted the social media pages for BatteryLala, Lalapack, and Tiloyo—years of brand equity, erased overnight.

Then came the final insult.

He uploaded a photo of me in lockup, taken illegally by the police, and circulated it across WhatsApp groups and social platforms. My last seen on WhatsApp bore witness to the exact date I was jailed. The shame, the humiliation—it was carefully curated to destroy my reputation, assassinate my credibility, and paralyze my brand presence.

That day, I learned what “law” truly meant in Pakistan. And that was the day I stopped believing in the system.

I spent New Year's Eve in a jail cell, watching faint fireworks burst over the distant skyline through the rusted bars. Outside, the world celebrated. Inside, I made a silent vow: this is not how my story ends.

Finally, on January 7, my bail was approved. As I walked out of prison, I said farewell to the few men I had befriended behind bars—some criminals, some wrongly accused, all human. Outside, Aamir was waiting, and with him stood my team, like soldiers in civilian clothes. They hugged me like I'd come back from war.

Without losing a minute, I sat in the car and drove straight to a restaurant where Haider had summoned the Peshawar sales team of DILOYO. I listened carefully. Within minutes, my entrepreneurial instincts told me the truth: Haider had repeated the same mistake he had made at Tiloyo—an unvetted, incapable sales team with zero market understanding, paid hefty salaries with no real results.

Disappointed but composed, I made my next stop: Gulbahar Police Station. I went to retrieve my phone, the very device that had been used against me. I confronted the officer—told him exactly what I thought of him, his corruption, and his betrayal of the uniform. Instead of shame, he responded with threats. That's when I understood—there's no justice in a rigged courtroom. The lawyer I consulted later confirmed it: "Forget revenge. You'll get nothing but headaches. Focus on your life. Win through success."

I returned to Islamabad and walked into my office—the same office that had witnessed dreams being born and broken. I immediately asked for a report from the Lahore sales team. The results were disastrous. Again, overpaid, underperforming personnel. No pipeline. No traction. No results.

I didn't wait.

I shut down all operations in Lahore and Peshawar, terminated all underperforming staff, and retained only the Islamabad and Quetta teams, where the franchise performance was still stable.

The closures burned us financially and left behind debts and liabilities. Worse, some franchisees in Islamabad—spooked by the jail incident—demanded refunds on their investments. DILOYO was under siege from all directions.

And yet, I didn't break.

Instead, I pivoted.

I handed the fundraising responsibility to Farhan, my most trusted comrade. I tasked him with finding serious investors—not talkers, but doers—who could see what we were building and commit to a long-term play.

We didn't want a cheque. We wanted belief.

And then… finally… after endless closed doors and polite rejections, a glimmer of hope appeared.

An investor who understood scale.

An investor who believed in brands.

An investor who wanted to create a unicorn in Pakistan.

The war wasn't over.

But a new battle was just beginning.

Chapter 43: Almost Funded

It was January 2022, a defining month in the DILOYO journey —when we finally met a man who seemed to speak both the language of capital and the grammar of vision.

He was a seasoned real estate developer, well-connected in the corridors of power, and financially liquid. For reasons of discretion, I'll refrain from naming him. Let's just say—he had the capital, the confidence, and most importantly, the capacity to back disruptive bets.

We pitched DILOYO to him.

And this time, it wasn't just another deck on a laptop screen—it was a narrative of disruption.

I walked him through our business model: a vertically integrated fruit retail chain leveraging modern branding, standardized packaging, and supply-chain control to deliver high-margin freshness through retail-tech architecture. The margins were real, the differentiation was visible, and the market—worth billions—was ripe for the taking.

Our ask: PKR 500 million (~$2 M USD) for a 30% equity stake in DILOYO. A clean cap table. No baggage. No complications.

The capital deployment plan was strategic:

50% for building our centralized processing and dehydration facility—our plant, the heartbeat of the backend.

40% for retail outlet expansion across urban clusters—starting with Islamabad, Lahore, and Quetta.

10% allocated for brand activation and customer education—because the product was too novel to sell itself at scale

without messaging.

He listened. Closely.

He didn't interrupt. He nodded often.

And when I concluded, he looked me in the eye and said,

"I want to be a part of this."

Just like that, we had a signed term sheet.

For the first time in my entrepreneurial journey, we had a committed institutional-grade investor—a man who had built buildings, and now wanted to build a brand.

I still remember the moment I broke the news to the team.

Farhan was speechless.

Haider looked like a man who had just seen the gates of heaven crack open.

Qasim’s eyes were shining like a man who finally realized he was no longer selling a dream—he was executing one.

We were no longer a hustle.

We were a funded startup.

This capital meant runway. It meant freedom. It meant we could now build DILOYO the way we had always envisioned—not bootstrapped and constrained, but with clarity of purpose and resources to match.

For us, this wasn't just investment.

It was momentum.

It was validation.

It was the Series A mentality before Series A paperwork.

We were dreaming of building a unicorn within three years—because everything about DILOYO had the DNA of a breakout brand. No one in Pakistan had imagined that a fruit shop could look like a flagship fashion retail outlet.

But we had done it.

We just needed the world to catch up.

All we required now was time, capital burn, and consumer habit formation—a bridge to cross the chasm from novelty to necessity.

Because we weren't just selling fruits anymore.

We were selling trust, hygiene, and experience in a market ruled by carts and chaos.

And we knew: once the habit formed, once customers internalized that clean fruit could be affordable and branded, DILOYO could dominate the category.

It wasn't a race.

It was a category creation play.

And now… we had the fuel.

What began as the most promising chapter of our startup journey soon started to unravel.

After signing the term sheet, a never-ending sequence of meetings followed—but not a single rupee hit our account for months. The optimism that once fueled our team was slowly replaced by confusion, then frustration. Each day was another “let’s meet tomorrow,” another coffee without a commitment, another boardroom session that led to nowhere.

By May 2022, we were still unfunded. Our burn rate was outpacing our reserves, and our confidence was running on fumes. We finally confronted our “investor,” demanding clarity.

In response, we were handed a mere PKR 2 million—and even that wasn't real funding. It was, in fact, a reimbursement for a franchise he had convinced a friend to buy. In total, over the next three months, we received PKR 10 million—just 2% of what was agreed. And even that trickled in with strings attached.

We held on, thinking the real capital would follow. We told ourselves, “This is just bridge capital… the actual round is inbound.”

But there was no Series A or Seed, no capital call, no bank transfer.

Just meetings. Just noise.

And during this entire time, our retail network was starving.

Our Islamabad and Quetta-based outlets—once the jewels of our expansion play—were now under-capitalized units hemorrhaging cash. Salaries, rent, supply chain disruptions—it was all compounding into a perfect storm. The brand was bleeding.

By July, I pulled the emergency brake.

I sat across from the investor and demanded a binary decision: **Are you in or out?**

That's when the truth surfaced—he had no liquidity. His own real estate business was insolvent, running on fumes and delayed payments. The 500 million rupees he had "promised" existed only in ambition, not in any financial account.

Once again, we had chosen the wrong investor.

And this mistake came with a cost.

A massive cost.

Haider, disillusioned and defeated, left the company.

All our Quetta franchises were shut down.

A mountain of liabilities—owed to landlords, suppliers, employees, and franchisees—had now landed squarely on my shoulders. The number was staggering: over USD 100,000 in debt. And I had no immediate runway.

I had no capital, no fallback, and no escape.

So I did what I had to—I promised every franchisee a 6-month repayment window. It was a blind promise based on sheer will. There was no capital stack to back it, no funder on standby. Just my word and their hope.

But inside, I was broken.

My mental bandwidth collapsed. I started avoiding calls. I couldn't face my creditors because I had no answers. I was spiraling through one of the darkest periods of my life—emotionally, financially, spiritually.

We had to shut down all remaining Islamabad outlets. Salaries were overdue. Rents were unpaid. The brand that once glittered like gold now existed only in memory and mockery.

DILOYO wasn't just a startup.

It was my dream.

And now it was on life support.

Chapter 44: Munazzah, My Fiancée

In the middle of all the chaos—financial burdens, collapsing startups, false investors, and lonely rebuilds—there was one light that stayed kindled: **Munazzah** .

She was the girl I was engaged to. Chosen by my mother. A decision rooted more in trust than in romance. But as life would have it, some stories bloom not in the first chapter, but after a few pages of understanding.

In the beginning, Munazzah had her own dreams. She wanted to be a doctor. That was the norm—every high-achieving girl in our culture was expected to wear a white coat and earn the title of MBBS. But when she fell short of the merit list, it shattered her.

I remember those conversations. Long, winding dialogues over the phone, where I tried to sew back the pieces of her confidence. I told her that medicine wasn't the only path to meaning. That the future didn't belong to stethoscopes alone—it belonged to algorithms, AI, and machine learning. It belonged to technology.

"Look around you," I'd say. "Every system that works, every city that breathes, every business that scales—it's all tech underneath. From mobile banking to blockchain. From e-commerce to artificial intelligence."

She listened. Quietly. And then slowly, she started believing.

She applied to one of the most prestigious institutions in Pakistan—FAST NUCES—for a degree in Computer Science. And when she got in, I celebrated her victory more than I had celebrated my own wins.

What began as an arranged engagement, started transforming into a bond rooted in shared curiosity and growth. She went from being a girl who once doubted her future to the one who began updating me on emerging technologies, coding languages, and new innovations in the tech world.

The teacher became the student.

And I fell in love.

Not with the idea of her, but with the version of her that was growing every day. Her mind, her resilience, her quiet strength. She became a source of light in the darkest rooms of my entrepreneurial life. When everything else collapsed—when DILOYO struggled, when debt mounted, when I questioned myself—she stood still, radiating faith.

Yes, we had our fights. Some silly. Some serious. Love isn't perfect. But she learned the art of compromise, of standing beside a man building empires out of broken bricks. She didn't ask me to quit. She never questioned the hustle. She understood that entrepreneurship is not a job—it's a storm, and she chose to stand in the middle of it, with me.

Her calmness was my chaos's cure.

Her code was my poetry.

In a world where I was building brands to make people believe in ideas, she was building me, brick by brick—coding my confidence back in every conversation, scripting stability in my unpredictable journey.

And somewhere between her assignments and my investor calls, a love story quietly compiled itself.

Chapter 45: The Rebirth in Hostel City

After closing all the DILOYO branches, it wasn't just the financial loss that weighed on me. It wasn't even the debt. What haunted me most was the trust—the trust our franchisees had placed in me. They had believed in the vision. They had believed in me. And I had failed them.

I needed to understand: What really went wrong? Was the idea flawed—or the execution?

I realized that I had scaled too fast, with too little capital, in markets that weren't ready. So I decided to go back to zero. Not square one, but ground truth. I needed to build from scratch again—this time, brick by brick, with full control and full presence.

We had equipment and machinery from the shut-down branches. That was all we had—and it was enough. We used what we had, and opened a small, self-owned outlet in an area called Hostel City.

Hostel City was unique. It was a dense student hub surrounded by universities and dozens of hostels. Thousands of young men and women from across Pakistan lived here—ambitious, educated, and open-minded. They weren't just customers. They were early adopters. They were a community.

This time, I wasn't managing from a distance. I decided to be on the ground myself. I called Aamir from Parachinar—my brother, my friend, my quiet co-founder in spirit—and he joined without hesitation. We hired our cousin Khizer as well. I trained both of them personally—not just in operations, but in mindset.

We made a big strategic shift.

We dropped the fruit retail business completely. DILOYO was no longer a fruit brand.

We repositioned it as a neighborhood café—small, cozy, experience-driven. The product line was focused and simplified: fresh juices for cold beverages, and tea and coffee for hot. We also added a few desserts—milk cake and brownies—to create a complete café offering.

It wasn't a pivot. It was a reinvention.

The area had what we needed—captive demand, low competition, and a connected community. These students understood modern branding, were price-sensitive but curious, and—most importantly—they talked to each other. Word of mouth could make or break us here.

So we rolled up our sleeves and went back to the counter.

We crafted a signature chai recipe—refined it, tested it, mastered it. Aamir prepared juices with his own hands, blending not just fruits but experiences. He engaged with customers directly, learning their preferences, hearing their stories. Khizer handled service, clean-up, and customer feedback. And me? I became everything—from barista to branch manager, from floor cleaner to cashier.

We were working with the brand, not for the brand.

There is a kind of learning that books or boardrooms will never give you—only the counter can. That's where we discovered the true anatomy of operational efficiency.

We learned that small things create big differences. The placement of a blender on the right versus the left side of the counter saved us five seconds per order. Multiply that by a hundred orders, and it becomes a full hour of saved labor.

Tool size, pot shape, even the grip of a spoon—it all mattered. The thickness of a chai cup changed the way heat traveled. UHT milk gave a creamier texture for one item, while pasteurized milk brought out better flavor in another. Frozen fruit smoothies taste different than fresh.

And flame—flame was everything.

Too high, and the flavor is burned. Too low, and the richness is lost. We learned when to boil, when to simmer, and when to stop stirring altogether. These weren't recipes. These were systems—manuals being written through muscle memory and repetition.

We understood why customers complained, how they decided to return, and what made them fall in love. This wasn't market research. This was market intimacy.

Hostel City’s DILOYO had just twelve seats. But that tiny space became our lab, our factory, our headquarters, and our dream incubator. Every drink we served was a data point. Every compliment was traction. Every complaint was product-market feedback.

And when Qasim and Farhan left—because I could no longer pay them—I didn’t panic. I didn’t blame. I went back to the counter, because that’s where I belonged. At least for now.

I wasn’t focused on scale. I was focused on clarity.

Because in startups, clarity is the most valuable capital.

So I stood at that tiny counter, day after day—not chasing metrics or media coverage—but quietly brewing the idea of what DILOYO could truly become.

And I left the outcomes to God.

Chapter 46: The Birth of BREE

Hostel City was where everything started to make sense.

Our tiny shop—with just twelve outdoor seats and a counter no bigger than a study desk—had finally cracked the code. The margins were great, the daily revenue healthy, and above all, one product had hit product-market fit like a hammer to the nail.

It was **chai** .

Our chai wasn't just a beverage. It became a ritual. It created traction in the most organic way possible—repeat orders, word of mouth, long waits for seats, and takeaways that doubled as walking advertisements. We didn't run a single marketing campaign. The customers did it for us.

Addiction is the strongest form of brand loyalty—and our chai had done exactly that.

We scaled our team—slowly and sustainably. Two new recruits were hired and trained. They became so overwhelmed with demand that we hired a third. All this, for a shop barely the size of a dorm room. That's what happens when you build something people truly want.

We handled dine-in, takeaway, and even local deliveries. Everything was manual, everything was scrappy—but everything worked.

And for the first time, we were profitable.

Not on paper. Not in Excel. But in real-time cash flow.

That's when it hit me:

In startups, timing is everything.

You can have the best team, the cleanest execution, and all the venture capital in the world—but if you miss the

timing, you're just noise.

DILOYO had failed in its first iteration because we were too early. Too elite. Too polished. We were trying to sell the future to a market still stuck in the present. And that meant burning capital just to educate the customer.

But here in Hostel City, we were right on time.

The product was familiar. The format was accessible. The pricing was friendly. And most importantly, the customer base —students—was intellectually aligned with our vision.

Lesson learned: **Don't be too late. But don't be too early either. Time is your strongest co-founder** .

Now that DILOYO had evolved into a café model, the name no longer fit. The original logo still carried fruit in its design, and our SECP registration categorized us under "fruits and allied products." It was time for a pivot—not just in strategy, but in identity.

So, I rebranded.

Since our hero products were chai and coffee—both brewed with precision and love—I coined a new name: **BREE** . Short. Bold. Derived from brew. It carried rhythm. It carried clarity.

And with it, I changed the brand theme to black and white—minimalist, timeless, and elegant. Just like our drinks.

BREE was not just a café.

It was a resurrection.

With product-market fit validated, operations streamlined, and brand identity reborn under BREE, I made a bold but calculated decision:

We were going to franchise again.

Not just because the business was now profitable—

But because I finally knew what I was doing.

This wasn't like last time, when we scaled chaos. This time, I had clarity. I understood the microeconomics of the store, the behavioral psychology of the consumer, the operational

inefficiencies, and most importantly, the DNA required in our people.

Before scaling a system, you must scale the right culture. And culture begins with the people behind the counter.

I had finally learned how to turn everyday employees into **“People Like Us.”**

People who care.

People who think.

People who don’t need constant supervision.

The secret? Train them not just in tasks—but in thinking.

Not just how to do things, but why we do them that way.

And once your HR runs on the same mental operating system as you, the business becomes a machine.

That’s when I picked up the phone and called Farhan and

Haider again.

I told them, “We’ve got a new name, a better model, and a second chance. Come build BREE with me.”

They didn’t hesitate. They said yes.

Together, we refined the new format:

Compact kiosks or small shops with minimal construction.

Each outlet having 4 tables and 16 chairs for outdoor seating.

The shop itself would be the production kitchen—serving only beverages and select desserts.

The total CAPEX required: just $9,000 USD.

That included everything—construction, equipment, branding, and setup.

We weren’t just selling franchises.

We were offering a turnkey business backed by real learnings,

not just glossy decks.

Farhan and Haider went back to doing what they do best—sales and execution.

And I focused on what mattered most: making BREE not just a brand, but a movement.

We weren't just experimenting with a café.

We were experimenting with a smarter, leaner, founder-led version of ourselves.

BREE wasn't a pivot.

It was the evolution of everything we had suffered for, failed at, and finally—understood.

Chapter 47: The Boy Who Looked Foreign

It was just another evening at DILOYO in Hostel City, or so I thought.

The air outside was fragrant with brewing chai and coffee. I stepped through the familiar entrance of DILOYO, not expecting anything out of the ordinary, when I noticed a striking figure standing by the LED screen, fiddling with its remote like it belonged to him.

He looked nothing like the rest of us—blonde-tinged hair, pale skin flushed slightly red, and features that made him seem like he'd walked straight out of an English summer and into our small café in Islamabad. I blinked in surprise.

Khizer, our spirited manager, grinned as he saw me notice the boy. "He's Australian," he said with mischief in his eyes. "Studying here. Lives in Hostel City."

I was stunned. What in the world would bring an Australian student to a dusty hostel alley in the heart of Pakistan? Curiosity overtook formality. I approached, and the boy greeted me with an effortless smile and a perfectly authentic accent—something between Sydney and Southern California.

We began to talk.

His cadence, his confidence, his command of the language—everything about him screamed foreign. And for a while, I truly believed it.

When he found out I was into entrepreneurship, he immediately started throwing around quotes and random

thoughts from Andrew Tate. Most of it didn't make much sense—just surface-level talk, loud words without weight—but he was clearly trying to sound smart and cool, to look like he knew things. Strangely, I liked that. He was trying to connect.

Then he asked about my favorite Netflix series and movies. I named a few—mainstream stuff, the kind you watch just to relax. He gave a half-smile, politely nodded, but I could sense it. Deep inside, he was quietly judging me, probably laughing at my basic taste.

Then he named his favorite shows—some obscure titles I had never even heard of. At that point, he felt a little smarter, maybe even a bit superior. But he didn't stop talking. He kept the conversation going.

Perhaps the only reason he considered me worth talking to was that I could speak better English than most people around him. That gave me a strange sort of pass into his world.

We kept talking until Khizer burst out laughing and revealed the prank. The boy was not from Melbourne or Miami—but from my own soil, from Parachinar. His name was **Danish** .

A local boy in borrowed tones.

He laughed too, and there was no bitterness in it. Only warmth. That was the first thing I noticed about Danish: his ease with being misunderstood.

From that day onward, he started showing up every evening. He would sit quietly in a corner of DILOYO, sipping chai, sometimes talking, mostly observing. I watched him watch the

world, and I saw something familiar in his eyes—something I knew from years ago when I sat in cafés dreaming of what I could become.

Over time, he began sharing pieces of his life. He came from a forgotten village in Parachinar, a place where muddy walls caged hopes, where opportunities didn't knock—they evaporated before arrival. And yet here he was, in Islamabad, sharper than most, alive with thought, speaking a language that opened doors for him even before he understood which doors he wanted to walk through.

His father, he told me one night in a voice both proud and pained, had sold his gun—his only possession of real worth—to pay his admission fee. That image stayed with me: a father laying down arms so his son could pick up books.

I won't share more of his personal story here. Some things are too sacred for the page. But I will say this—something inside me changed after meeting Danish. I felt, deep in my gut, that this boy deserved more. That it was now **my responsibility** to show him the mirror of his own brilliance.

I brought him into BREE.

He was raw, but not naïve. Observant. Bold. Far more attuned to the pulse of the brand than some of my older, more experienced teammates. Where others saw only tea and transactions, Danish saw energy, movement, *vision* .

So I kept him close. Not out of favoritism, but out of instinct.

Naturally, this caused some murmurs within the team.

Jealousy began to slither through the ranks, subtle at first, then sharper. A few couldn't understand why a newcomer, barely in his early twenties, was given such importance, such proximity to the core.

But I let the chaos rise. Quietly. Intentionally.

Because I knew storms shake away the weak roots.

Danish had already proven he could weather much more than this. So I didn't flinch. I let the ripples move through the water until they settled.

I never compromised on one thing: keeping him where he belonged— *at the core of BREE's beating heart.*

In the stories of startups, people often talk about ideas and investments. Rarely do they speak of people—of how one unlikely meeting can change the course of a journey.

For me, Danish was one of those rare moments.

Not a partner yet. Not an executive.

But already—unmistakably—family.

Chapter 48: The Rise of BREE

The vision for BREE had never been grandeur—it was clarity. A sharp, minimal, scalable café model that could deliver premium taste at a street-level price point. And in August 2023, we took our first calculated step toward that scale.

We signed the lease on a micro-location at 6th Road, Rawalpindi—a dense commercial zone with massive footfall and minimal real estate flexibility. The space was just 10 square meters. Yes, barely enough to stretch your arms inside. But to us, it was a pilot pod—our minimum viable outlet.

We designed it like a smart kitchen. A sleek black container, fully modular, optimized for space, hygiene, and flow. Inside, every square foot had a purpose. Outside, we deployed four minimalist tables—seating 16 people at max capacity. Our revenue thesis didn't depend on dine-in—it hinged on takeaway volumes and delivery optimization.

This wasn't just a cafe. It was a unit economics lab.

We built for operational efficiency from day one. Low

overheads, tight kitchen processes, high output. Our mission was simple: serve best-in-class chai, coffee, and desserts at price points even students could afford. To do that, we needed margin by design, not by markup.

The secret weapon? Location strategy and lean construction.

We replicated this blueprint in other Islamabad neighborhoods. Each BREE outlet was small in footprint but massive in intent. These weren't shops. They were nodes in a decentralized hospitality network.

But as we scaled, we knew instinct alone wouldn't cut it anymore.

We rolled out Odoo ERP, a cloud-based enterprise system that became the backbone of BREE. From recipe locking to daily reconciliation, HR logs to vendor management, Odoo gave us what most startups ignore—real-time data integrity. And with better data, came better decisions.

I trained every single branch manager myself. Not just on systems, but on philosophy. They weren't employees—they were operators of a live experiment. Every detail mattered. From the sugar and patti ratio in the chai to the tone of voice used at the billing counter.

We built standard operating procedures (SOPs), locked recipes in the ERP, and started building brand uniformity. BREE was no longer a café. It was an F&B system with scalability logic.

Back at our Hostel City flagship, the signs of virality were clear. The small outlet was flooded daily. There were queues not just outside the shop, but inside the staff corridors. We were training new HR there, onboarding vendors, and testing new products. It had become both a customer hotspot and an internal academy.

So we took the next bold step: expansion of the flagship.

We rented a 200 square meter empty plot directly across the street. We designed an outdoor seating arrangement for 150 people, using minimalist yet functional architecture. We built it like a pop-up park café—open skies, soft lights, and clean branding. An open canvas on the walls where one could paint their dreams.

Hostel City was no longer a test market.

It was our campus of conviction.

Within two months, the construction of all new BREE outlets was complete—each one inaugurated personally by its franchise partner. One by one, the shutters rolled up to reveal smart, compact cafes with international aesthetics. Polished wood works, black-and-white branding, industrial finishes—people couldn't believe this was a local Pakistani brand.

We had built more than cafes.

We had built experiential micro-retail units with global sensibilities.

As the franchises went live, the market responded instantly.

From day one, each outlet hit peak capacity during prime hours. It was a beautiful problem to have—and a brutal one to manage. Every franchise manager started reporting the same issue: “We’re running out of seats.”

Our model only allowed for 16 covers per outlet. That was the design. That was the efficiency. But now, the market was telling us something else: demand was outpacing design.

The real surprise was our flagship at Hostel City.

Even after expanding the seating capacity from 12 to 150 covers, we still couldn't accommodate the footfall. The place overflowed daily—waves of students, professionals, friends, couples. People waited outside. Others brought their own chairs. The space vibrated with the sounds of conversations, laughter, the occasional guitar, debates, poetry.

It wasn't just a café anymore.

It was a cultural hub.

And that's when we realized we had cracked something deeper than coffee and chai.

We had hit product-market fit, but not just in business terms. We had built something the community emotionally needed. A safe, creative, affordable space—where people weren't just buying drinks. They were buying belonging.

So we doubled down.

We installed a mini-library in a quiet corner and built a workstation with charging ports for students and freelancers. We added soft lights, more plants, and a low-volume playlist curated weekly by our staff. People started staying for hours. Some even began calling it their "second home."

Hostel City had evolved into more than our flagship.

It had become our startup university.

Every process, every challenge, every experiment—we tested and learned here. The branch taught us customer psychology, real-time feedback loops, the role of ambiance in brand love, and how to operationalize scale without compromising soul.

We didn’t just serve chai.

We served community.

And for the first time in years, I wasn’t chasing unicorns—I was raising one.

Chapter 49: Breaking and Rebuilding

Growth and scale never arrive alone—they bring with them a flood of challenges.

Among the storm of expansion, one name deserves to shine on this page: Danish.

He was just a college boy when he joined us—slim, soft-spoken, with a face that made people ask if he was foreign. But what mattered wasn't his face. It was his fire. Quiet but consuming. He understood BREE not just as a job but as a calling.

Within weeks, I noticed something rare in him:
A mind that learned fast, and a heart that cared deeply.
Finance, HR, marketing—he absorbed everything like dry earth absorbing rain.
He fell in love with the idea of entrepreneurship.
And I fell in admiration for his capacity.

He became the soul of a new concept we had always talked about:

"People Like Us."
People who don't just work at BREE. They live it.

I entrusted him with the most sensitive responsibility—to turn others into People Like Us.

And he didn't disappoint.

But not everyone was ready for that transformation.

You see, alongside Danish stood a different group.
The old guard.
Boys who had been with us since the humble days of DILOYO.
Loyal. Kind-hearted. Devoted. But untrained.

They loved BREE. They felt proud wearing the uniform.
But they carried with them the ghosts of the past—the culture of a single-store, informal setup, where friendship blurred the lines between roles.

At DILOYO, a manager could brew chai and a barista could argue with the supplier.
No rules. Just rhythms.

But this—this was different.

We now had 62 employees, multiple branches, and systems that demanded discipline.

Danish, the youngest of them all, stepped into this battlefield.
His task was to implement SOPs, especially ERP adoption, which had become the backbone of BREE's operations.

But he wasn't met with applause.

He was met with walls.

Some resisted quietly. Some mocked him.
And a few let their resistance boil into violence.

Yes—violence.
In one ugly moment, a few of our old employees even tried to physically confront Danish.

That shook me to the core.

We were no longer a team—we were becoming a battlefield of egos and resistance.

It was one of the hardest decisions of my life, but I had to make it.

We let go of some of the oldest, most experienced people. Not because they were bad. But because they couldn't grow with us.
They were still living in DILOYO.
We were building BREE.

Danish didn't back down. He took charge of branches where replacements were yet to arrive. He wore many hats—trainer, barista, branch manager—and never once complained.

For many relentless weeks, he stood firm against the storm.
And slowly… order emerged.
Resistance turned into respect.
Structure took root where chaos once reigned.

On the other end, Aamir, my younger brother, was the Head of Operations. But the storm caught him off guard. He was overwhelmed, and honestly, clueless.

So I stepped in.

I worked shoulder to shoulder with him.
Taught him how to handle growth, how to create systems, how to think like a leader, not a manager.

Those months, our core team worked 16 hours a day, sometimes more. We were stretched thin. Exhausted. But we didn't stop.

And then—like the eye of a storm—calm returned.

Aamir found his rhythm. I handed him the reins.
Danish, having proved himself again, was promoted to handle marketing and brand building.

And that's when we started doing something magical.

We began noticing the faces that showed up again and again. Our regulars. Our silent fans. Our family.

So we did something no cafe had done before.

We honored them.

We designed personalized, framed compliments for our most loyal customers.
Not generic thank-yous—but storytelling frames, with their names, and sometimes even the little memories they had created at BREE.

A table where she broke up with someone and found herself again.
A boy who studied for his board exams every evening with

our karak chai.
A group of singers who would rehearse their songs under the stars at BREE.

Each frame was a tribute. A memory frozen in gratitude.

And those who received them… they didn't just become customers.

They became keepers of our legacy.

Even now, I believe hundreds of those frames hang on living room walls and dorm shelves.
They are pieces of our journey—of theirs and ours.

So here's my humble request to every soul who holds one of those frames:

If you still have your BREE compliment, take a picture. Post it with the hashtags #TheLastPitch and #BREE. Let the world know what we shared. Let's relive the love.

Because in the end, it wasn't just about chai.
It was about people.
About building something sacred— **together** .

Chapter 50: When the Data Whispered

Technology had finally become our eyes.
The ERP system, quietly humming in the background, was doing something extraordinary:
Listening, recording, learning.
Every sale, every return, every inventory update—it was all captured in real time, turning chaos into clarity.

Then came the moment of truth.
The first month's financial reports landed on my desk.

The Hostel City branch was shining bright—a clear winner.
Profitable, packed, and thriving.

But then… came the numbers from the tiny smart outlets.

And everything I believed was flipped on its head.

No profits .

Despite long queues. Despite full tables. Despite the buzz we had seen with our own eyes—the numbers told a different story.

For a few seconds, I sat frozen.
Then the silence turned to storm.
I called an emergency meeting of the core team.

I turned to Mr. Ijaz, our CFO, who sat quietly, hands folded, the reports open before him.

“Explain this. These branches were full. People were waiting outside. How could there be no profit?”

He walked us through the numbers. Every page, every line. And slowly, the fog began to lift.

After a heated discussion, we agreed—perhaps it was too early to judge. It was only the first month. Maybe we were still adjusting, still settling.

We decided to wait.
One more month.
But I gave a clear instruction:

“From now on, every transaction, every stock movement, every loss, every breakage—everything—goes through ERP. No excuses. And reconcile every gram of inventory with the system.”

The team nodded.
The storm calmed.
And we waited.

Then came the second month’s financials—and with them, a whisper from the data that would pierce deeper than any argument or assumption.

This time, I didn’t question the team.

I questioned myself.

I sat with the data like a monk sitting with scripture. I mapped every number with ground reality. I replayed every observation in my head. I filtered emotion out and let logic in.

And what I found was humbling.

We had made another classic entrepreneurial mistake—despite all the lessons, all the experience, all the scars from before.

> We had misread consumer habits.
>
> We had underestimated peak hours and off-hours.
>
> We had overestimated worker efficiency.
>
> We had calculated cost structures with idealism, not realism.

We assumed the crowd meant profit.

But Pakistan, like every market, had its own rhythm. People came in crowds but bought selectively. Many would sit, sip slowly, spend less. The takeaway culture wasn't as strong as we thought. And our tiny spaces, while efficient, had become bottlenecks. Labor wasn't consistent. Hours were unpredictable. Sales didn't scale evenly across shifts.

Yet, for all the disappointment, there was something beautiful

too.

The data had spoken—and taught us lessons that even experience couldn't.

If we hadn't been tracking every digit, we could've gone on for months thinking we were winning.

But now , we knew.

And knowledge, even when painful, is a gift in entrepreneurship.

I told myself:

"This is the final mistake. From here, we operate like an equation."

But one problem remained.
Rectification.

And this time, rectification didn't just mean tweaking recipes or adjusting prices.

It meant something bigger.

It meant closing outlets.

And that meant more losses.
More people to face.

More franchisees to answer to.
More debt—the very monster I had fought so hard to tame.

It was a hard realization:
To fix the system, I had to first dismantle parts of it.

That night, I didn't sleep.

Because entrepreneurship is not just about building.

Sometimes, it's about unbuilding, so that what remains is true, solid, and unshakeable.

Chapter 51: The Equation of BREE

Out of data, reflection, and countless hard lessons— **BREE** was reborn.

It was no longer just a food outlet, no longer just an entrepreneurial experiment fighting to survive in the crowded

streets of Islamabad. It had become a movement, an idea with a soul. And I—bruised by failures, refined by insight—became its storyteller once again.

From that point onward, I began to pitch not just a café, but a philosophy. A living ideology built on real people, real places, and real purpose.

At the heart of it all was one truth:

> **"We are not in the food business.**
> **We are in the people business—**
> **and we serve food to them."**

That sentence became our north star. It wasn't about profit margins or exotic recipes anymore. It was about **humans** — the conversations they craved, the spaces they deserved, and the sense of belonging they lacked in a fractured world. BREE was to become the place where they found that connection again.

From this epiphany, a **simple yet profound formula** emerged. A triangle of purpose on which the future of BREE would be built:

Community

Affordability

Inclusivity

Community

We realized something that most brands miss while chasing profit: people don't just need a place to eat—they need a place to **exist** .

We chose to open BREE in places where **tribes** already lived —not in elitist food streets, but in tight-knit, often overlooked neighborhoods. A tribe wasn't a demographic—it was a circle of familiarity. Students in hostels, people in neighborhoods, freelancers in digital communities, even blue-collar workers in urban colonies—all connected by shared daily lives.

These were the places where BREE could thrive not just as a business, but as a hub of relationships.

Each new BREE outlet would be a minimum of 500 square meters, with a seating capacity of at least 250 people. Not because we wanted to boast scale, but because we wanted to hold multiple tribes in one breath.

Affordability

In a city like Islamabad where commercial rent burns holes in every plan, affordability often becomes a broken promise.

But we discovered a secret: **the rooftops.**

Rooftops are the forgotten real estate of our urban landscape —massive, underused, and perfectly positioned. And they

offered us exactly what we needed: **space without debt** .

By moving BREE onto the rooftops of buildings in our target communities, we could control our costs, maintain quality, and still serve at a price that welcomed everyone—from students with coins to salaried workers with weary wallets.

Inclusivity

From the mix of community and affordability, something powerful emerged: **inclusivity** .

BREE was becoming the one place where a university student and a fruit vendor could sit at adjacent tables and feel no divide. A place where people didn't feel small because of their wallet, accent, or clothes. A place where everyone belonged.

To deepen this inclusivity, we added more than food and furniture.

> We built a **library and co-working station** , inviting students and remote workers to read, write, and think.
>
> We added a **podcast studio** —not for influencers, but for **local voices** . People from that very community could come, sit, talk, and record. They could tell their stories to the world, creating content, connection, and pride in where they came from.

We weren't just building a café.
We were building a culture.

One rooftop at a time.

This wasn't just our next move—it was our blueprint, our declaration.

BREE was no longer chasing survival.
It was chasing significance.

And we were just getting started.

Chapter 52: The Founder's Formula

There comes a moment in every founder's journey when the fog clears—not by miracle, but by mileage. That moment came for me not in a conference hall, not through a TED Talk, not in a motivational book—but in the heat of a tiny kitchen in Hostel City, surrounded by blenders, steam, staff chaos, and raw data.

BREE didn't just teach me entrepreneurship.

It decoded it.

For years, I had been chasing all the right things: scalable models, product-market fit, standardization, team culture, financial control, customer obsession. But the problem was—I was chasing them separately. BREE brought them all together. And it showed me the real equation.

Not the one they teach in startup bootcamps or investor decks. Not the self-help clichés in books that tell you to “hustle harder” or “think big.” No. The real equation only reveals itself when you're deep in the trenches—when your fingers are stained with tea, your shirt smells like oranges from juice prep, and your eyes are fixed on the ERP dashboard at midnight, trying to understand why two shops with the same design perform so differently.

When we opened tiny BREE kiosks across Islamabad—smart, elegant 10-square-meter outlets with outside seating—we were confident. The outlets looked premium, the quality was unmatched, and the customer footfall during peak hours was overwhelming.

But the numbers told a different story.

Despite heavy traffic, the outlets weren’t profitable.

The seating capacity choked. Peak hours meant only four hours of real business. Customers sat too long with one cup of chai. Others had nowhere to sit. The remaining hours brought little revenue. Worse, the seating was on government land—technically illegal—so enforcement officers could shut us down at any time.

On the other hand, our Hostel City branch, legally built on a rented open plot, served 500+ customers daily and was consistently profitable. It had a 150-seat capacity. It operated in a concentrated student market with natural word-of-mouth marketing and negligible customer acquisition cost.

That's when I realized: entrepreneurship is math. Not motivation.

We hadn't failed at running a café—we had failed at calculating the business correctly.

Margins, rent-to-revenue ratios, seating turnover rate, dwell time, average ticket size, legality of property—all these variables combined to form the actual startup equation. And once we understood that, we had clarity.

This wasn't just a brand we were building—it was a system.

And the system only worked when the numbers worked.

People often ask me, "What's the secret of entrepreneurship?"

I'll tell you what it's not.

It's not watching Reels of rich people giving 20-second advice. It's not following flashy startup pages selling fake guru courses titled 'How to Raise Your First Million' or 'Build a 6-Figure Business in 30 Days.'

This isn't Instagram. This is real life. Real business. And real blood.

The real arena of entrepreneurship is somewhere between a profit and loss sheet, a tired team, a disappointed customer, and a dream you refuse to give up on. It's a lonely, silent, sleepless pursuit where results don't come in days—they come in cycles. Cycles of trial, error, learning, and iteration.

Youth must stop looking for shortcuts. They must stop believing in overnight success. Because the real gold is not in crypto groups, trading scams, or fake startup vanity titles. The real gold is in learning a business deeply enough that your next move is not a guess—it's a decision backed by data and experience.

Every founder should build one business with their own hands. Not just manage it. But run it. Serve chai. Clean the counter. Talk to the customers. Make the mistakes. Count the bills. Audit the numbers. That's the only way to earn real entrepreneurial intelligence.

I learned more in that one year behind a juice counter than I did in all the startup seminars combined. And I now know this: real entrepreneurship cannot be taught. It must be lived.

And this book?

It's not a motivational book.

It's not even a business manual.

It’s evidence.

Evidence that if you stay long enough in the fire, you stop burning—and start forging.

BREE is no longer just a brand. It is the name of a framework. A philosophy. A code of execution. And this chapter, perhaps more than any other in this book, is the soul of that code.

If you’ve made it this far in the story, I have one humble request:

Don’t just admire this journey.

Apply it.

Chapter 53: The Price of Belief

Among the few franchisees we had brought on board under the old BREE model was a man of wealth—a goldsmith by trade, but with a heart hardened by entitlement and power.
I had once seen promise in his handshake.
But soon, that handshake tightened into a noose.

When the tides turned and debts mounted, most creditors knocked on the door.
He kicked it in.

One night, unannounced, he arrived—with a police officer and three unknown men.
There was no court order, no FIR, no due process.
Just force.

Farhan, Danish, and I were blindfolded, shoved into a car like criminals.
I still remember the sound of Farhan's cries, the dull thud of fists, and the smell of fear in the air.
We were beaten during the ride—punched, slapped, insulted.
I wasn't sure if it was a kidnapping or the beginning of something worse.

When we arrived, they dragged us out of the car.
The goldsmith stood over me and said coldly,
"You always claimed Pakistan wasn't a banana republic. Look around now—and say it. Admit it."

I said nothing. But inside, something cracked.

The next morning, my lawyer rushed to the police station—only to find there was no record of our arrest.
Because there was no arrest.
It was an abduction, disguised in uniform.

He filed an emergency motion, and the court ordered a raid on the police station to retrieve us.
But before they could arrive, a call went through.

One of the rogue officers panicked, pulled me out again—alone this time—and drove me to what he called a "safe house."
I never saw where I was. My eyes were tied. My wrists sore from the binds.

That day, the goldsmith made me an offer:
"Give me the Hostel City franchise, or your friends will suffer again."

I looked at Farhan, bruised and silent, and Danish, who sat trembling—his eyes vacant, spirit shattered.
I knew if I refused, something in them would never come back.

So I agreed.

I told them I'd hand over the branch, just to stop the violence.
And I did.

I went to court and facilitated the transfer—not by choice, but under duress.
The irony? This branch was our university, the place where BREE had been truly born.
It had taught us lessons in entrepreneurship, resilience, and hope.
And now it was gone—taken by those who saw might as right.

Still, I tried to believe in the system.
I whispered to Danish,
“Don’t worry. There is law. Justice will prevail.”

But the next morning, as we stepped out of my house to go to court, the same men were waiting.
This time, not with badges—but with threat in their eyes.

We rushed back in, locked the door, and that was the last time Danish ever walked into BREE again.
He was broken.
Shaken beyond repair.
That morning stole the last of his hope.

And for the first time, I agreed with the goldsmith:
“Yes, this is a banana republic.”

I gave him what he wanted: the franchise and a handsome payment, just to stop the madness.
It was the price of peace.
A price paid in trauma.

But I refused to let this be the end of the story.

Outside the courtroom, beyond the pain and betrayal, new franchises were rising.
Built on our mathematically proven ideology, designed with care, and positioned in thriving communities—we were ready to open doors to something better.

I focused my eyes on those rooftops. On those dreams.

Yes, creditors kept circling like vultures, demanding repayment.
And all I could give them were promises.
But they weren't empty.

I poured every ounce of hope into the upcoming branches.
Because if they worked—and I knew they would—
I'd finally have the means to repay every single soul who once stood by me.

Chapter 54: The Branch We Buried

The real heartbreak didn't come with the closures of tiny branches.
It didn't come with the debt.
It came the day we surrendered our Hostel City branch.

That place wasn't just concrete, tables, and a signboard.
It was a soul we had built with our own hands.
And for Aamir, it was something even deeper—a second home.

He had managed that branch, brewed chai behind its counter, swept the floors, and shared countless laughs with the students and dreamers who sat there. He wasn't just the

manager—he was a part of the place.
The regulars didn't call him "Sir." They called him Aamir bhai.
He had poured his time, his sweat, and his heart into every inch of that café.

And so, when we had to give it up, it broke him.

I still remember the vacant look in his eyes.
The kind of silence only grief can explain.
He told me more than once, "If we ever get funds again… we have to come back here. But this time, even bigger. Even more beautiful."

But when customers asked him why BREE left, he couldn't tell them the truth.
So he smiled a broken smile and told a kinder lie:

"We're upgrading… something bigger is coming."

Farhan, too, was shattered. That branch wasn't just a business outlet—it was our office, our team's gathering spot, our creative temple. Ideas were born there. Friendships were sealed there. Strategies were written over chai and laughter at midnight.

And then came **January 1st, 2025** , when our new franchise of Dhok Kala Khan had just opened.

I drove past Hostel City with a heavy heart, just to see it once more.
But what met my eyes was not BREE.
It was a new signboard, with a name that wasn't ours.

I didn’t stop the car.
I couldn’t.

I pulled over far from the crowd, stared at the sign from a distance… and I cried.
Not just tears of loss, but tears for everything we had become inside those walls.
That branch wasn’t a café—it was a classroom. An institution.
It had taught us entrepreneurship, persistence, resilience, and how to fall in love with a dream.

And now, it was gone.
It felt like we had been evicted not just from a space, but from a chapter of our lives.

I gathered the team the next day. Everyone was low, quiet, grieving.
But I stood in front of them and made a promise—not just as a founder, but as their brother:

“We will not accept defeat. We will rise again. And one day, BREE will return to Hostel City—more majestic, more alive than ever before.”

Since that day, I’ve never gone back to that location.
I avoid that road.
I don’t want to see someone else's name standing where our dream once stood proud.
It’s not denial. It’s reverence. Some things are too sacred to watch fade.

In those days of little sleep and heavy thoughts, I’d often dream of that branch.

I saw myself there again, sitting with my team.
The buzz of laughter. The steam from the chai. The music.
The warmth.
I'd wake up missing it like a long-lost love.

Even our old customers wrote to us on social media.

"Why did BREE leave?"
"It was our favorite spot…"
"We still miss the taste."

Their words were daggers—but also flowers.
They reminded me that we had built something worth missing.
And there is pride in that.

But life—no matter how poetic—doesn't pause for pain.
So we turned our faces toward the new dawn.
New branches were under construction.
New hopes were being carved in wood and steel and ambition.

And in the quiet between tasks, whenever our hearts longed for that place, we reminded ourselves:

We didn't lose BREE.
We just left a part of it behind.
And someday, we'll come back… not to reclaim it, but to honor it.

Chapter 55: The Weight of Promises

We began to sell not just a franchise—but a proven ideology. One that was rooted in data, in experience, in bruised knees and hopeful eyes.
An idea that had already shown its worth in the chaos of Hostel City.

This time, we approached the market with clarity and confidence.

The model was simple and fair:

A **franchise fee of $9,000** —modest compared to what traditional brands demand.

The **construction and setup costs** were to be borne by the franchisee.

In return, **BREE would bring the magic** : technology, quality assurance, human resource, branding, and a ready-to-run business system.

We would manage operations on their behalf and take **only 20% of net profit** as royalty.

A clean deal. Transparent. No fine print.

And it worked.

Two franchise deals were signed under this new model—two believers who saw what BREE was becoming and wanted to be part of its next chapter.
This time, we were meticulous. We handpicked untapped urban rooftops, places that met our every criterion of community, affordability, and scale. We provided architectural layouts, operating frameworks, and began construction.

But even as the future was being built, the past demanded to be buried.

The time had come to make a difficult but necessary decision: To close all the tiny old branches.

Those small outlets—born out of resourcefulness and desperation—had served their purpose. But continuing them now would be like digging deeper into a rabbit hole with no light at the end. Their limitations weren't just operational—they were ideological contradictions to what BREE now stood for.

I made the decision with a heavy heart.
But entrepreneurship is not a place for sentimentality when survival is at stake.

And with that decision, I inherited a mountain of debt I didn't know how to climb.

But this debt wasn't born of mismanagement or recklessness. It was born of a promise.

We had told our early franchisees that if it didn't work, we would make them whole.
We made that promise not in a contract, but in faith—in handshakes, in eye contact, in mutual belief.

And now that it didn't work, I was ready to honor that belief, even if it meant sacrificing my own peace, my sleep, my breath.

But the weight was unbearable.

And yet—I did not stop.

In my chest still burned a fragile but stubborn hope.
That BREE would work, that this ideology—refined by pain and polished by vision—would take flight.

And when it did, I would pay back every soul who had believed in me.
Every person who gave me their money, their trust, their patience.
Not because the law demanded it—but because my soul did.

BREE was never just a business.
It was a redemption story in the making.

Chapter 56: The New Year Flame

The last nails had been hammered in Dhok Kala Khan branch, the final coat of paint dried under the pale Rawalpindi winter sun, and the aroma of freshly cut wood and brewing dreams lingered in the air.

The Dhok Kala Khan branch was finally ready.

It stood not just as a café, but as a symbol of survival—a phoenix rising from the ashes of heartbreak, betrayal, and loss.
Every corner of that rooftop space had a story, every cable and counter had been installed with precision—and every rupee had been stretched like elastic to save cost for the franchisee. We deployed second-hand but reliable machinery, hand-picked every piece of equipment, and negotiated like seasoned hawks.
The miracle? We had built a dream space on a shoestring budget—and it showed.

We chose New Year's Eve of 2025 for the inauguration, not just for its symbolism, but because we wanted to start the year with hope, in light, not in fear.

And on January 1st, 2025, the doors of that rooftop café swung open.

We didn't spend a single rupee on marketing. No banners, no sponsored posts, no influencers.
And yet, they came—waves of them.

From the dusty alleyways of Dhok Kala Khan, young men and women found their way to BREE.
They walked up those stairs and entered a world they had never imagined for themselves:
A cozy library.
A silent workstation.
Ambient lighting.
Affordable tea.
And respect.

It was the kind of place where two university students, too poor to sit in the posh food streets of Islamabad, could now sit across from each other and speak about their futures.
Where a young girl could open her laptop without judgment, and a boy could order a cup of tea and feel like he belonged.

It wasn't just a business anymore.
It was a revolution of dignity.

Sales grew each day, and we hadn't even introduced our value-added menu yet. I knew we could easily double the average ticket size once we launched those items.
The numbers were validating what I had long believed:
community + **affordability** + **inclusivity** = **success** .

But just as the sun began to rise on this new chapter, a shadow crawled in.

The franchisee.

Despite the agreement, despite the effort, despite the success —he hadn't paid the franchise fee.
Not only the fee but the committed marketing budget.

I approached him calmly. Explained that the café was only seven days old and performing beyond expectations. I told him that our staff—trained and loyal—were still running the place with excellence. I reminded him that BREE had built the brand, developed the model, and was delivering results. All we asked was for him to honor the agreement.

He didn't.

Instead, he played the oldest game in the book: blame.
He nitpicked. Twisted facts. Manufactured issues that didn't exist.

And then—without warning—he terminated the contract.

He said he would no longer carry the BREE name and that, legally, we had no right to the franchise fee.
He removed the signboard, replaced our name with one of his own, and took full control of the space we had built from sweat and sacrifice.

We were erased.

It felt like a knife to the gut.

The team—already bruised from the loss of Hostel City—was shattered.
Farhan stared into the distance for hours. Danish wasn't there anymore, but his absence echoed through our hearts again.
And I—
I felt hollow.
I had built a palace with my bare hands, and it was stolen in a blink.

But just when despair threatened to consume us, a flicker of hope reminded us of our next dream taking shape in Bhara Kahu.

Construction was already underway.
And so, like war-weary soldiers marching into yet another battle, we tied our hopes to Bhara Kahu.
Not because we had no other choice—but because giving up wasn't an option anymore.
BREE wasn't just a business—it had become a cause.

And we weren't done yet.

Chapter 57: The Empty Throne

We watched every brick, every beam, every stroke of color come together as the Bhara Kahu branch of BREE slowly emerged from the dust.

It was more than just a café under construction.
It was the last light at the end of a collapsing tunnel.
And this time, we *needed* it to work—not just for our business, but for our sanity.

By the end of January 2025, construction was complete. The franchisee had followed our guidance precisely—he purchased the equipment we recommended, installed the machinery we vetted, and created the kind of space we envisioned: open, ambient, and deeply rooted in community.

February 9, 2025 arrived like a festival.

Balloons, soft lights, heartfelt speeches, and the buzz of anticipation floated in the air. The power of community pulsed through the veins of that rooftop. People from every walk of life climbed those stairs, curious to see what this "BREE" was all about. And like magic, it clicked instantly.

The very next day, the sales astonished even our most hopeful forecasts.

By the end of February—despite operating for only 19 days—the branch had not just broken even, it had generated real profit.
It felt like the winds had finally shifted.
The team—once drained and discouraged—found new fire in their eyes.

But it wasn't the money that moved me most.
It was the transformation.

The library and the workstation, carefully woven into the

heart of BREE, became sacred spaces for those who had never known such comfort.
The shy boy who sold vegetables now shared tea with a student from an elite college.
Women met new neighbors, exchanged phone numbers, discussed recipes and books.
Children ran barefoot across the rooftop, their laughter echoing against the tin rooftops of Bhara Kahu.
The rich and the poor sat side by side, sipping the same chai, reading the same books, dreaming the same dreams.

It was beautiful. It was alive. It was BREE.

And yet, behind that joy, a familiar storm was brewing.

We gently reminded the franchisee about the franchise fee and the advertising budget, as agreed.
His face tightened. His words became evasive.

“I don’t have the money right now,” he said.

We waited.

But then he started asking too many questions—not about growth, not about community, but about control.
He had learned about the setbacks at Dhok Kala Khan and Hostel City.
And instead of standing with us, he saw an opportunity to hold back.
To step in.

He quietly placed his own management into the branch.
He changed our carefully designed menu.

He violated our model, diluted our brand, and twisted our ideology beyond recognition.

It wasn't BREE anymore.
It was a ghost—wearing our clothes but soulless inside.

On May 30th, 2025, we did what we never imagined we'd do:
We handed it over.
We told him to remove our name, our identity, from the signage.
We gave up our third and final branch.

And just like that, BREE had no home left.

Years of sweat, sleepless nights, burning dreams and broken backs…
All gone.
We had fought for our brand like warriors. We had redefined it, protected it, refined it with everything we had—
And yet, at the end of it all, we were left with nothing.

No property.
No café.
No franchise.
Only a name—unattached to any space.
Only a vision—floating ungrounded in a ruthless world.

But even in this hollow moment, as I stood with my hands empty, I told myself:
They can take the branches.
They can take the signage.
They can hijack the sales.
But they cannot take the truth—
That BREE was never a place. It was an idea. A purpose. A

calling.

And some ideas are too sacred to die.

Chapter 58: The Cost of a Dream

My failures weren't just mine.
They spilled into the hearts of those who loved me.
My father—his every prayer soaked in hope for my success.
My mother and sisters—whispering my name in every *dua* , asking relatives and strangers alike to remember me in their supplications.
And my brother—always worried. About my safety. About the law. About whether I'd survive this storm of debt, collapse, and silence.

Our house had forgotten peace.
Everyone restless.
Everyone waiting for the tide to turn.

But what truly broke me…
was losing Munazzah.

Through every fall, she stood beside me—trembling, but standing.

Sleepless nights, red eyes, anxious texts.
She believed in me. Even when I didn't.
And I—foolishly—kept hiding the truth from her.
I told her tales of Steve Jobs sleeping on floors, of Jack Ma being rejected a hundred times, of Howard Schultz when he went through the worst times while building Starbucks.

I made her believe in the legend of the underdog.
I made her believe I was destined to rise.
I told her I'd build a unicorn startup. That one day, people would look at her and say,

"That's the woman who stood beside him through it all."

And she—bless her heart— **believed** .

She prayed for me every single night.
That was all she could do. And it was everything.

For five long years, she held on.
But love alone cannot fight the weight of the world.

At the end, it wasn't her who let go.
It was her family—tired of waiting, fearful of the future, demanding she choose certainty over dreams.
And she… had no strength left to resist them.

As I write this— **June 15, 2025** —it's been thirty days since I last heard her voice.
Thirty days of silence.
Thirty days of trying to breathe without the one person who once made the air feel lighter.

And I know…
Somewhere, she must be missing me too.
How does she answer when friends ask, “Where is he?”
What does she say when someone mentions my name?

I was her favorite person in the world.
She used to speak of me like I was made of stardust.
Like I was the man who would change the world.

She had suffered since childhood. Her life was marked by pain.
And somehow—I became her ray of hope.
But in my madness for entrepreneurship, in my blind devotion to a dream, I extinguished that light.

Dear Munazzah,
You are one of the reasons I’m telling this story.
This book— *my final pitch to the world* —carries your name between every line.
And if anyone ever asks why I didn’t give up,
It’s because I still carry you in my heart.

Someone once said,

“A winner is just a loser who tried one more time.”

So here I am.
Trying.
One more time.

I haven’t lost this war yet.
And maybe—just maybe—I’ll still create a story with a happy ending.

But here's the truth that most people won't tell you:
Happy endings are for movies.
In the real world, things don't always tie up with a bow.
People lose. Dreams shatter. Love slips away.

And yet—we wake up.
We build again.
We try one more time.

Even if it costs us the very things we were fighting for.

Because hope is a stubborn thing.
And so am I.

Chapter 59: What Comes Next

May 24th, 2025 — Saturday evening.
I called the entire BREE team for one final meeting.

The agenda was simple, yet soul-stirring:
"What next?"

Were we ready to surrender and allow this journey to fade into history—a passionate but unfinished tale? Or were we brave enough to continue the struggle?

How could we walk away now—when all our entrepreneurial mistakes had been learned from, our systems refined, and our business model proven? It would be like abandoning a tree just as its first fruits ripen. BREE had finally begun to work—not just as a business—but **as** a movement. And most importantly, the people had validated it.

Our core ideology—Community, Affordability, and Inclusivity—wasn't just theory. It was changing lives. From the urban neighborhoods to the overlooked corners of suburban Pakistan, BREE had become a rare space of belonging. It was a café, yes—but also a classroom, a playground, a haven.

How could we forget the radiant faces of children playing, the young boys and girls exchanging ideas, the mothers rocking infants in their arms? Even the transgender community, often pushed to the margins of society, found safety and dignity within BREE's walls. They came every evening—not because of what we sold, but because of what we stood for.

We owed it to them to bring BREE back.

In the middle of this charged discussion, Farhan stood up and said,

"Let's go out and knock on every door. Let's sell BREE franchises—but this time on our terms. We'll find the right people. We'll make sure they never abandon us again."

But I hesitated.

"To whom, Farhan? To the same investors who only worship

profit? Who see numbers but not people? The illiterate investors with no mission and vision? We're building a people's business—and for us, profit is a by-product, not the goal. They'll never understand what we're trying to do. Maybe we were just born in the wrong place."

He looked me in the eye and replied with quiet certainty:

"Then we'll find the right place. The world is vast. There must be someone out there who believes in what we believe in."

That night, something shifted.

We didn't just agree to keep going—we made a vow. It became our life's mission to take BREE to every town where communities live and dream. No longer just a startup, BREE was now a social movement with a single goal: to exist in every untapped market and reclaim public spaces for every forgotten voice.

We also acknowledged a hard truth:
In Pakistan, elite brands have planted the seeds of inferiority deep within the minds of the working class. Middle- and lower-income youth walk past expensive cafés and restaurants with lowered eyes, silently told they don't belong. Not because they lack ambition—but because they lack access.

That's one of the main reasons so many never break out of the class they're born into.

BREE is our response to that injustice.

We imagined a place in every town where children could play together, where youth could brainstorm their futures, where elders could sit and speak of legacy and change. A place where no one feels they're less than others because of their clothes or wallet.

This, we decided, is our revolution.
To open hundreds of BREE branches in the towns and localities where people need connection, safety, and dignity. We know how to keep costs low, maintain operational efficiency, and offer the best spaces and best products—at prices people can actually afford.

And as the meeting drew to a close, one thing became clear: As the founder and leader, I had to create a plan. A new strategy. A final pitch.

But this time, I would not stand in front of another investor who only sees bottom lines.
This time, I would deliver my pitch to the world.
Not to ask for money, but to awaken hearts.
Not to raise funds, but to raise hope.

This time, my pitch had to become more than a proposal.
It had to become a movement.

Chapter 60: The Last Pitch

At BREE, we've always believed in the power of stories. Not just because they inspire—but because they connect hearts across distances. So I decided to tell ours. Not in a boardroom. Not behind a glossy pitch deck. But here—in these pages—where the truth breathes freely.

This book is my final pitch, not to investors, but to you—to the world.

I don't know if it will work.
Maybe it won't. Maybe this story, like so many in this part of the world, will end quietly—without applause, without justice. If that happens, so be it. I've come to terms with the cruelty of fate. But I still choose hope. I still believe that the universe conspires in favor of those who dare.

This story is not just a memoir of an entrepreneur.
It's the last chance of a dreamer who risked everything.
It's a window into what entrepreneurship feels like in forgotten corners of the world, where startup journeys don't begin in tech hubs but in tribal towns, amidst poverty, displacement, and discrimination.

I want this book to reach every startup founder in Silicon Valley, and every young dreamer in Bangalore, London, Dubai, and beyond—so they can see what it truly takes to keep building when the world gives you no foundation.

So here we are: a small, battle-hardened team, hoping that our story reaches ears that care.

We have only one goal:
If we sell 100,000 copies of this book and 100 BREE franchises to visionary believers around the world, we'll have enough to reignite the dream.
We'll build a movement that changes the lives of millions—just like we always dreamed.

But we cannot do it alone.
We are asking for your help—yes, you, the one holding this book. You can support in three ways:

1. Share our story.
Post a short video on social media, tag us, and tell people about *The Last Pitch* . If even one million people hear this, the spark will spread.

2. Buy a BREE franchise.
It's not just a smart business—it's a **social revolution** . BREE lifts communities, brings in profit, and is fully managed with best practices, ERP systems, and full transparency. It's unlike any franchise you've known—because it's built for the people.

3. Reach out and support us.
Whether with time, skills, resources, or connections—just drop a message on WhatsApp or email. Every act of support matters.

I promise—this story is worth your time, your heart, and your help. If you've made it this far, you already know: *The Last Pitch* is not just a book. It's a **movement** .

Writing it forced me to open old wounds—to revisit a childhood scarred by poverty, trauma, and voicelessness in a tribal land forgotten by maps. I emerged from a world where

hope is rare, where most dreams don't survive past boyhood. But here I am.

And despite the heartbreak, the debts, the tortures, and the betrayals—I am still standing.
Still hoping.
Still building.

If this story touched you, if it moves even a fraction of the world to act—then maybe, just maybe, you'll one day hear about a revolutionary brand rising from Pakistan.
Its name will be **BREE** .

And if you never hear about BREE again—it means we tried… and we were lost in the dust of forgotten stories.

But for now, you're reading this.
And that means… there's still hope.

Thank you for listening. Thank you for reading. Thank you—for giving this dream one more chance.

— *Qamar Abbas*